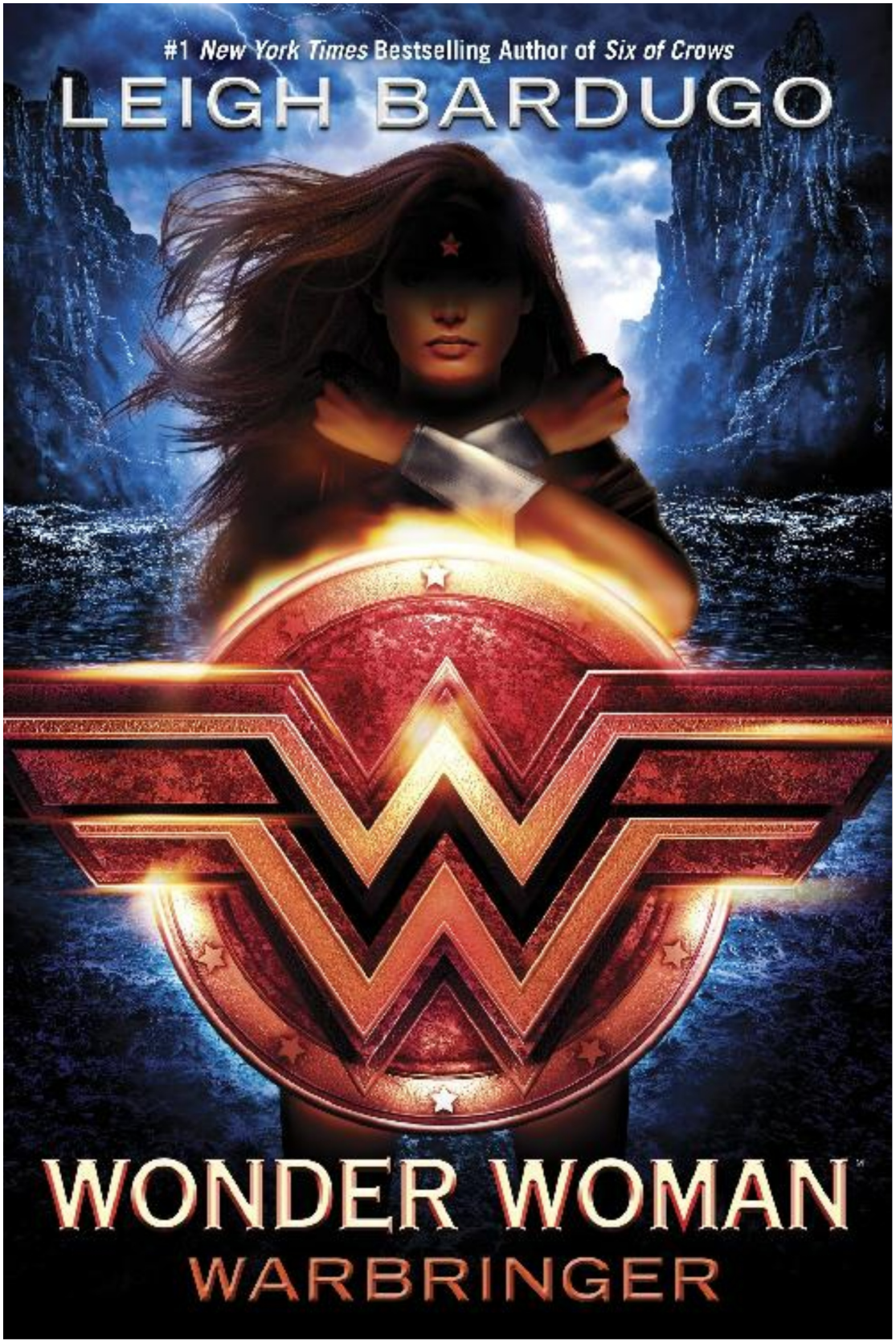
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author of Six of Crows
LEIGH BARDUGO
WONDER WOMAN
WARBRINGER

Wonder Woman: Warbringer
by Leigh Bardugo

Batman: Nightwalker
by Marie Lu

— COMING SOON —

Catwoman
by Sarah J. Maas

Superman
by Matt de la Peña

Wonder Woman created by William Moulton Marston

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2017 DC Comics.
WONDER WOMAN and all related characters and elements © & ™ DC Comics. WB SHIELD: ™ & © WBEI. (s17)

RHUS38090

Cover art by Jacey

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Random House and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Bardugo, Leigh, author.
Title: Wonder Woman : Warbringer / Leigh Bardugo.
Other titles: Warbringer

Contents

Cover
Other Titles
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Epigraph

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29

Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Author's Note
Acknowledgments
About the Author

To Joanna Volpe—
sister in battle

"Draw nigh, come through the press to grips with me, so shall ye learn what might wells up in breasts of Amazons. With my blood is mingled war!"

—Quintus Smyrnaeus, *The Fall of Troy*

You do not enter a race to lose.

Diana bounced lightly on her toes at the starting line, her calves taut as bowstrings, her mother's words reverberating in her ears. A noisy crowd had gathered for the wrestling matches and javelin throws that would mark the start of the Nemeseian Games, but the real event was the footrace, and now the stands were buzzing with word that the queen's daughter had entered the competition.

When Hippolyta had seen Diana amid the runners clustered on the arena sands, she'd displayed no surprise. As was tradition, she'd descended from her viewing platform to wish the athletes luck in their endeavors, sharing a joke here, offering a kind word of encouragement there. She had nodded briefly to Diana, showing her no special favor, but she'd whispered, so low that only her daughter could hear, "You do not enter a race to lose."

Amazons lined the path that led out of the arena, already stamping their feet and chanting for the games to begin.

On Diana's right, Rani flashed her a radiant smile. "Good luck today." She was always kind, always gracious, and, of course, always victorious.

To Diana's left, Thyra snorted and shook her head. "She's going to need it."

Diana ignored her. She'd been looking forward to this race for weeks—a trek across the island to retrieve one of the red flags hung beneath the great dome in Bana-Mighdall. In a flat-out sprint, she didn't have a chance. She still hadn't come into the fullness of her Amazon strength. *You will in time,* her mother had promised. But her mother promised a lot of things.

This race was different. It required strategy, and Diana was ready. She'd been training in secret, running sprints with Maeve, and plotting a route that had rougher terrain but was definitely a straighter shot to the western tip of the island. She'd even—well, she hadn't exactly *spied*....She'd gathered intelligence on the other Amazons in the race. She was still the smallest, and of course the youngest, but she'd shot up in the last year, and she was nearly as tall as Thyra now.

I don't need luck, she told herself. *I have a plan.* She glanced down the row of Amazons gathered at the starting line like troops readying for war and amended, *But a little luck wouldn't hurt, either*. She wanted that laurel crown. It was better than any royal circlet or tiara—an honor that couldn't be given, that had to be earned.

She found Maeve's red hair and freckled face in the crowd and grinned, trying to project confidence. Maeve returned the smile and gestured with both hands as if she were tamping down the air. She mouthed the words, "Steady on."

Diana rolled her eyes but nodded and tried to slow her breathing. She had a bad habit of coming out too fast and wasting her speed too early.

Now she cleared her mind and forced herself to concentrate on the course as Tekmessa walked the line, surveying the runners, jewels glinting in her thick corona of curls, silver bands flashing on her brown arms. She was Hippolyta's closest advisor, second in rank only to the queen, and she carried herself as if her belted indigo shift were battle armor.

"Take it easy, Pyxis," Tek murmured to Diana as she passed. "Wouldn't want to see you crack." Diana heard Thyra snort again, but she refused to flinch at the nickname. *You won't be smirking when I'm on the victors' podium,* she promised.

Tek raised her hands for silence and bowed to Hippolyta, who sat between two other members of the Amazon Council in the royal loge—a high platform shaded by a silken overhang dyed in the vibrant red and blue of the queen's colors. Diana knew that was where her mother wanted her right now, seated beside her, waiting for the start of the games instead of competing. None of that would matter when she won.

Hippolyta dipped her chin the barest amount, elegant in her white tunic and riding trousers, a simple circlet resting against her forehead. She looked relaxed, at her ease, as if she might decide to leap down and join the competition at any time, but still every inch the queen.

Tek addressed the athletes gathered on the arena sands. "In whose honor do you compete?"

"For the glory of the Amazons," they replied in unison. "For the glory of our queen." Diana felt her heart beat harder. She'd never said the words before, not as a competitor.

"To whom do we give praise each day?" Tek trumpeted.

"Hera," they chorused. "Athena, Demeter, Hestia, Aphrodite, Artemis." The goddesses who had created Themyscira and gifted it to Hippolyta as a place of refuge.

Tek paused, and along the line, Diana heard the whispers of other names: Oya, Durga, Freyja, Mary, Yael. Names once cried out in death, the last prayers of female warriors fallen in battle, the words that had brought them to this island and given them new life as Amazons. Beside Diana, Rani murmured the names of the demon-fighting Matri, the seven mothers, and pressed the rectangular amulet she always wore to her lips.

Tek raised a blood-red flag identical to those that would be waiting for the runners in Bana-Mighdall.

"May the island guide you to just victory!" she shouted.

She dropped the red silk. The crowd roared. The runners surged toward the eastern arch. Like that, the race had begun.

Diana and Maeve had anticipated a bottleneck, but Diana still felt a pang of frustration as runners clogged the stone throat of the tunnel, a tangle of white tunics and muscled limbs, footsteps echoing off the stone, all of them trying to get clear of the arena at once. Then they were on the road, sprinting across the island, each runner choosing her own course.

You do not enter a race to lose.

Diana set her pace to the rhythm of those words, bare feet slapping the packed earth of the road that would lead her through the tangle of the Cybelian Woods to the island's northern coast.

Ordinarily, a miles-long trek through this forest would be a slow one, hampered by fallen trees and tangles of vines so thick they had to be hacked through with a blade you didn't mind dulling. But Diana had plotted her way well. An hour after she entered the woods, she burst from the trees onto the deserted coast road. The wind lifted her hair, and salt spray lashed her face. She breathed deep, checked the position of the sun. She was going to win—not just place but win.

She'd mapped out the course the week before with Maeve, and they'd run it twice in secret, in the gray-light hours of early morning, when their sisters were first rising from their beds, when the kitchen fires were still being kindled, and the only curious eyes they'd had to worry about belonged to anyone up early to hunt game or cast nets for the day's catch. But hunters kept to the woods and meadows farther south, and no one fished off this part of the coast; there was no good place to launch a boat, just the steep steel-colored cliffs plunging straight down to the sea, and a tiny, unwelcoming cove that could only be reached by a path so narrow you had to shuffle down sideways, back pressed to the rock.

The northern shore was gray, grim, and inhospitable, and Diana knew every inch of its secret landscape, its crags and caves, its tide pools teeming with limpets and anemones. It was a good place to be alone. *The island seeks to please,* her mother had told her. It was why Themyscira was forested by redwoods in some places and rubber trees in others; why you could spend an afternoon roaming the grasslands on a scoop-neck pony and the evening atop a camel, scaling a moonlit dragonback of sand dunes. They were all pieces of the lives the Amazons had led before they came to the island, little landscapes of the heart.

Diana sometimes wondered if Themyscira had called the northern coast into being just for her so that she could challenge herself climbing on the sheer drop of its cliffs, so that she could have a place to herself when the weight of being Hippolyta's daughter got to be too much.

You do not enter a race to lose.

Her mother had not been issuing a general warning. Diana's losses meant something different, and they both knew it—and not only because she was a princess.

Diana could almost feel Tek's knowing gaze on her, hear the mocking in her voice. *Take it easy, Pyxis*. That was the nickname Tek had given her. Pyxis. A little clay pot made to store jewels or a tincture of carmine for pinking the lips. The name was harmless, meant to tease, always said in love—or so Tek claimed. But it stung every time: a reminder that Diana was not like the other Amazons, and never would be. Her sisters were battle-proven warriors, steel forged from suffering and honed to greatness as they passed from life to immortality. All of them had earned their place on Themyscira. All but Diana, born of the island's soil and Hippolyta's longing for a child, fashioned from

clay by her mother's hands—hollow and breakable. *Take it easy, Pyxis. Wouldn't want to see you crack.*

Diana steadied her breathing, kept her pace even. *Not today, Tek. This day the laurel belongs to me.*

She spared the briefest glance at the horizon, letting the sea breeze cool the sweat on her brow. Through the mists, she glimpsed the white shape of a ship. It had come close enough to the boundary that Diana could make out its sails. The craft was small—a schooner maybe? She had trouble remembering nautical details. Mainmast, mizzenmast, a thousand names for sails, and knots for rigging. It was one thing to be out on a boat, learning from Teuta, who had sailed with Illyrian pirates, but quite another to be stuck in the library at the Epheseum, staring glazed-eyed at diagrams of a brigantine or a caravel.

Sometimes Diana and Maeve made a game of trying to spot ships or planes, and once they'd even seen the fat blot of a cruise ship on the horizon. But most mortals knew to steer clear of their particular corner of the Aegean, where compasses spun and instruments suddenly refused to obey.

Today it looked like a storm was picking up past the mists of the boundary, and Diana was sorry she couldn't stop to watch it. The rains that came to Themyscira were tediously gentle and predictable, nothing like the threatening rumble of thunder, the shimmer of a far-off lightning strike.

"Do you ever miss storms?" Diana had asked one afternoon as she and Maeve lazed on the palace's sun-soaked rooftop terrace, listening to the distant roar and clatter of a tempest. Maeve had died in the Crossbarry Ambush, the last words on her lips a prayer to Saint Brigid of Kildare. She was new to the island by Amazon standards, and came from Cork, where storms were common.

"No," Maeve had said in her lilting voice. "I miss a good cup of tea, dancing, boys—definitely not rain."

"We dance," Diana protested.

Maeve had just laughed. "You dance differently when you know you won't live forever." Then she'd stretched, freckles like dense clouds of pollen on her white skin. "I think I was a cat in another life, because all I want is to lie around sleeping in the world's biggest sunbeam."

Steady on. Diana resisted the urge to speed forward. It was hard to remember to keep something in reserve with the early-morning sun on her shoulders and the wind at her back. She felt strong. But it was easy to feel strong when she was on her own.

A *boom* sounded over the waves, a hard metallic clap like a door slamming shut. Diana's steps faltered. On the blue horizon, a billowing column of smoke rose, flames licking at its base. The schooner was on fire, its prow blown to splinters and one of its masts smashed, the sail dragging over the rails.

Should I have tied her up? Diana wondered as she scaled the cliff, the noon sun warming her shoulders after the chill of the cave. *No*. She didn't have any rope, and tying up a girl who had almost died didn't seem like the right thing to do. But she'd need to have answers ready when she returned. Alia had been shaken by the wreck, but she was coming back to herself, and she clearly wasn't a fool. She wouldn't be content to stay in the cave for long.

Diana lengthened her stride. There was no point in going to Bana-Mighdall to retrieve the flag. She would return to the arena and make some kind of excuse, but she couldn't think beyond that. The farther she got from the cliffs, the more foolish her decision seemed. A cold, prickling fear had coiled just beneath her ribs. The island had its own rules, its own prohibitions, and there were reasons for all of them. No weapons were carried except for training and exhibition. The few off-island missions permitted were those sanctioned by the Amazon Council and the Oracle—and then only to preserve the isolation of Themyscira.

She needed to get Alia back to the mortal world as soon as possible. Days would pass among the humans while Alia waited in her cave. Rescue ships might be sent for her lost boat. If Diana moved quickly enough, maybe she could get Alia out there on another craft so that she could rendezvous with them. Even if the girl tried to tell the authorities about Themyscira and by some chance they believed her, Alia would never be able to find her way back to the island.

The deep bellow of a horn sounded from the Epheseum, and Diana's heart gave a sick thud. The race was over. Someone had claimed the laurel crown she'd been so sure she would wear today. *I saved a life,* she reminded herself, but the thought was hardly comforting. If anyone found out about Alia, Diana would be sent from her home forever. Of all the island's rules, the prohibition against outsiders was the most sacred. Only Amazons who had won the right to a life on Themyscira belonged here. They died gloriously in battle, proving their courage and heart, and if, in their last moments, they cried out to a goddess, they might be offered a new life, one of peace and honor among sisters. *Athena, Chandraghanta, Pele, Banba*. Goddesses from all over the world, warriors of every nation. Each Amazon had earned her place on the island. All but Diana, of course.

That prickling coil tightened in her gut. Maybe rescuing Alia hadn't been a misstep, but something fixed in Diana's fate. If she had never really belonged on the island, maybe exile was inevitable.

She hurried her steps as the towers of the Epheseum came into view, but her feet felt weighted with dread. How exactly was she going to face her mother after this?

Too soon, the dirt of the road became thick slabs of Istrian stone, white and weathered beneath her bare feet. As she entered the city, she felt as if she could see people staring down at her from their balconies and open gardens, their curious eyes dogging her path to the arena. It was one of the most

beautiful buildings in the city, a crown of glowing white stone perched atop slender arches, each emblazoned with the name of a different champion.

Diana passed beneath the arch dedicated to Penthesilea. She could hear cheering and feet stamping, and when she emerged into the sunlit arena, the sight that greeted her was worse than she'd expected. She hadn't just lost. She was the last to return. The victors were on the podium, and the presentation of the laurels had already begun. Naturally, Rani had placed first. She'd been a distance runner in her life as a mortal and as an Amazon. The worst part was how much Diana liked her. She was relentlessly humble and kind and had even offered to help Diana train. Diana wondered if it got tiring being splendid all the time. Maybe heroes were just like that.

As she made her way toward the dais, she forced herself to smile. Though the sun had helped to dry her, she was keenly aware of the rumpled mess of her tunic, the seawater knots in her hair. Perhaps if she acted like the race hadn't mattered, it wouldn't. But she'd only taken a few steps when Tek emerged from the crowd and slung an arm around her neck.

Diana stiffened and then hated herself for it because she knew Tek could tell.

"Aw, little Pyxis," Tek crooned, "you get bogged down in the mud?"

A soft hiss rose from the people standing nearby. They all understood the insult. Little Pyxis, made of clay.

Diana grinned. "Miss me, Tek? There's got to be someone else around here for you to judge."

A few chuckles bubbled up from the crowd. *Keep walking,* Diana told herself. *Keep your head held high*. The problem was that Tek was a born general. She sensed weakness and knew exactly where to find the cracks. *You've got to give as good as you get,* Maeve had warned Diana, *or Tek won't back down. She's cautious around Hippolyta, but eventually you're the one who's going to sit that throne.*

Not if Tek has her way, Diana thought.

"Don't be cross, Pyxis," said Tek. "There's always next time. And the time after that."

As Diana moved through the spectators, she heard Tek's allies chiming in.

"Maybe they'll move the finish line for the next race," said Otrera.

"Why not?" Thyra replied. "There are different rules when you're royalty."

That was a direct slight to her mother, but Diana grinned as if nothing in the world could bother her. "Amazing how some people never tire of the same song, isn't it?" she said as she strolled toward the steps that led to the royal loge. "You only learn one dance, I guess you have to keep doing it."

Some of the onlookers nodded approvingly. They wanted a princess who didn't flinch at the easy barbs, who stood her ground, who could spar with words instead of fists. After all, what real harm had Tek caused? Sometimes Diana wished Tek would challenge her outright. She'd lose, but she'd rather take a beating than constantly pretend the taunts and jabs didn't bother her.

It was tiring knowing that every time she faltered, someone would be there to notice.

But that wasn't the worst of it. At least Tek was honest about what she thought. The hardest thing was knowing that, though many of the people smiling at her right now might be kind to her, might even show her loyalty because she was her mother's daughter and they loved their queen, they would never believe Diana worthy—not to walk among them, certainly not to wear a crown. And they were right. Diana was the only Amazon who had been born an Amazon.

If Tek found out about Alia, if she discovered what Diana had done, she'd have everything she ever wanted: Diana banished from the island, the clay girl lost to the World of Man—and Tek would never have to challenge Hippolyta outright.

Well, she's not going to find out, Diana promised herself. *There has to be a way to get Alia off the island.* Diana just needed to secure a boat, get Alia on it, and find some human to hand her off to on the other side of the boundary.

Or she could tell the truth. Face ridicule, a trial if she was lucky, instant exile if she wasn't. The dictates of the goddesses who had formed Themyscira were not to be taken lightly, and no offerings to Hera or prayers to Athena would change what she'd done. Would Diana's mother speak on her behalf? Offer excuses for her daughter's failings? Or just follow the punishment demanded by law? Diana wasn't sure which would be worse.

Forget it. She would get a boat somehow.

She scaled the steps to the queen's loge, keenly aware that all attention had shifted from the victors' podium to her. Light filtered through the silken overhang, casting the shaded platform in red and blue, jasmine tumbling from its railings in sweet-smelling clouds. There were no seasons on Themyscira, but Hippolyta had the vines and plants changed with every equinox and solstice. *We must mark time,* she'd told Diana. *We must work to maintain our connection to the mortal world. We are not gods. We must always remember we were born mortal.*

Not all of us, Diana had thought but hadn't said at the time. Sometimes it was as if Hippolyta had forgotten Diana's origins. Or maybe she just wanted to. *There are different rules when you're royalty.*

Diana had no doubt that her mother had seen her as soon as she entered the arena, but now Hippolyta turned as if glimpsing her for the first time and smiled in welcome.

She opened her arms and embraced Diana briefly. It was the proper thing to do. Diana had lost. If her mother showed too much warmth, it would be perceived as foolish or inappropriate. If she treated Diana too coldly, it might be seen as a rejection and could have far-reaching repercussions. The embrace was as it should be and nothing more, balanced on the sword's edge of politics. So why did it still prick her heart?

Diana knew her role. She remained at her mother's side as they placed the crowns of laurel on the victors' heads, and smiled and congratulated the morning's competitors. But the cold coil of worry in her belly seemed to have

sprouted tentacles, and with every passing moment they squeezed tighter. She told herself not to fidget, to stop checking the position of the sun in the sky. She felt sure her mother could tell something was wrong. Diana could only hope Hippolyta would blame her behavior on the shame of losing the race.

The games would continue through the afternoon, followed by a new play at the amphitheater in the evening. Diana hoped to be back at the cave long before then, but there was no escaping the first feast. Long tables had been set in the gardens beside the arena, laden with warm bread, heaps of poached cuttlefish, grilled strips of venison, and pitchers of wine and mare's milk.

Diana forced herself to take some rice and fish, and pushed a piece of fresh honeycomb around her plate. It was usually her favorite, but her gut was too full of worry. She caught Maeve's questioning glance from the end of the table, but she had to remain with her mother. Besides, what exactly was she going to tell Maeve? *I definitely would have won but I was busy transgressing against divine law.*

"In Pontus we would have had lamb grilled on the spit," Tek said, pushing at the venison on her plate. "Proper meat, not this gamey stuff."

No animals were raised for slaughter on the island. If meat was wanted, then it had to be hunted. It was not a rule created by the goddesses or a condition demanded by the island, but Hippolyta's law. She valued all life. Tek valued her stomach.

Hippolyta just laughed. "If you can't find meat worth eating, drink more wine."

Tek raised her glass and they clinked cups, then bent their heads together giggling like girls. Diana had never seen anyone make Hippolyta laugh the way Tek did. They'd fought side by side in the mortal world, ruled together, argued together, and together they'd chosen to turn from the World of Man. They were *prota adelfis,* the first of the Amazons on Themyscira, sisters in all but blood. Tek didn't hate Hippolyta—Diana was fairly sure she *couldn't* hate her—only what she'd done when she'd created Diana. Hippolyta had made a life from nothing. She'd brought a girl into being on Themyscira. She'd made an Amazon when only the gods could do such a thing.

Once, when Diana was just a child, she'd woken in her palace bedroom to hear them arguing. She'd slid from her bed, the marble cold beneath her feet, and padded down the hall to the Iolanth Court.

This was the heart of their home, a wide terrace of graceful columns that overlooked the gardens below and the city beyond. The palace was full of objects that hinted at the world her mother had known before the island—a golden cup, a shallow black kylix painted with dancing women, a saddle made of tufted felt—pieces of a puzzle Diana had never been able to fit together into a whole story. But the Iolanth Court held no mysteries. It ran the length of the western side of the palace, open on three sides so that it was always flooded with sunlight and the sound of fountains burbling in the gardens below. Sweet, waxy plumeria twined around its columns, and its balustrade was marked by potted orange trees that drew the gossipy buzz of bees and hummingbirds.

Diana and her mother took most of their meals there at a long table that was always cluttered with Diana's schoolbooks, half-full glasses of water or wine, a dish of figs, or a spill of freshly cut flowers. It was where Hippolyta welcomed new Amazons to Themyscira after they had been purified, her voice low and gracious as she explained the rules of the island.

But with Tek, Hippolyta ceased to be the dignified, benevolent queen. She was not the mother that Diana knew, either; she was someone else, someone a little wild and careless, someone who slouched in her chair and snorted when she laughed.

Hippolyta was not laughing that night. She was pacing back and forth on the terrace, the silks of her saffron-colored robe billowing behind her like a banner of war.

"She is a *child,* Tek. There is nothing dangerous about her."

"She is a danger to our very way of life," Tek said. She was seated on a bench at the long table in her riding clothes, elbows resting on the table, legs stretched out before her. "You know the law. No outsiders."

"She isn't an outsider. She's a little girl. She was made of this island's very earth, fashioned by my own hands. She's never even been *outside*."

"There are rules, Hippolyta. We are immortal. We're not meant to conceive, and the island was intended for those of us who have known the perils of the World of Man, who know what it is to fight against the endless tide of mortal violence, who choose to turn away from it. You had no right to make that decision for Diana."

"She will be raised in a world without conflict. She'll walk a land in which blood has never been spilled."

"Then how will she know to value it? The gods did not intend this. They made their laws for a reason, and you have subverted them."

"The gods blessed her! They endowed her with living breath, made my blood to flow in her veins, bestowed their gifts upon her." She sat down beside Tek. "Be reasonable. Do you think it was my power that gave her life? You know none of us have magic like that."

Tek took Hippolyta's hands in hers. Seated like that, hands clasped, they looked like they were making a pact, like they were colluding over some wonderful plan.

"Hippolyta," Tek said gently, "when do the gods give such a gift without exacting a price? There is always a danger, always a cost, even if we haven't seen it yet."

"And what would you have me do?"

"I don't know." Tek rose and rested her hands on the balustrade, looking out at the dark stretch of city and sea. Diana remembered being surprised by how many lanterns were still lit in the houses below, as if this were the appointed hour in which adults argued. "You've put us in an impossible position. There will be a reckoning for this, Hippolyta, and all for the sake of something to call your own."

"She belongs to *us,* Tek. All of us." Hippolyta laid a hand on Tek's arm and for a moment, Diana thought they might make peace, but then Tek shrugged her off.

"*You* made the choice. Tell yourself what you need to, Highness, but we'll all pay the price."

Now Diana watched Tek and her mother talking as if that argument and all the others that had followed didn't matter, as if Tek's regular torment of Diana was a fond game. Hippolyta had always waved away Tek's behavior, her coldness, claiming that it would fade as the years passed and no disaster befell Themyscira. Instead, it had gotten worse. Diana was almost seventeen, and the only thing that seemed to have changed was that she presented a bigger target.

Diana's eyes flicked to the sundial at the center of the feasting grounds. Alia had been alone in the cave for nearly three hours. Diana didn't have time to fret over Tek. She needed to figure out how she was going to get her hands on a boat.

As if she could read Diana's mind, Tek said, "Somewhere you need to be, Princess?" Her eyes were slightly narrowed, her gaze speculative. Tek saw too much. It was probably what made her such a great leader.

"I can't think of anywhere," Diana said pleasantly. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you wanted me to leave."

"Now, what would give you that idea?"

"Enough of that," Hippolyta said with a flick of her hand, as if she could simply wipe away discord. And sure enough, the musicians began to play and the feast table filled with song and laughter.

Diana moved the food around on her plate and did her best to be merry as the sun arced westward. She couldn't be the first to leave and risk looking like she was sulking after her loss. At last, Rani rose from the table and stretched. "Who wants to run to the beach?" she asked. She held the red silk flag aloft and shouted, "Catch me if you can!"

Chairs were shoved backward as the Amazons rose, whooping and cheering, to follow Rani down to the shore before the next round of games began. Diana took the chance to slip away to the alcove where Maeve was waiting. She wore a crushed-velvet tunic in pale celadon that barely counted as a dress and that she had paired with nothing but sandals and a circlet of leaf-bright green beads braided into her red hair.

"I think you may be missing your trousers," Diana said as Maeve looped an arm through hers, and they headed toward the palace.

"Two things I love best about this place—the lack of rain, and the lack of propriety. Sweet Mother of All Good Things, I thought that meal would never end."

"I know. I was seated across from Tek."

"Was she terrible?"

"No more than usual. I think she was on good behavior because of my mother and Rani."

"It *is* hard to be petty around Rani. She always makes you feel your time would be better spent improving yourself."

"Or emblazoning her profile on a coin." They passed beneath a colonnade thick with curling grape vines. "Maeve," Diana said as casually as she could, "do you know if the Council has mentioned a mission on the horizon anytime soon?"

"Don't start that again."

"It was just a question."

"Even if by some chance they did, you know your mother would never let you go."

"She can't keep me here forever."

"Actually, she can. She's the queen, remember?" Diana scowled, but Maeve continued on. "She's going to use any excuse to keep you here, and you gave her a good one today. What happened? What went wrong?"

Diana hesitated. She didn't want to lie to Maeve. She didn't want to lie to anyone. Still, if she shared this secret, Maeve would be forced to either reveal Diana's crime or keep Diana's confidence and risk exile herself.

"There were rocks blocking the northern road," said Diana. "Some kind of landslide."

Maeve frowned. "A landslide? Do you think anyone followed you? Knew your route?"

"You're not actually suggesting sabotage. Tek wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't she?"

No, Diana thought but didn't say. *Tek doesn't think she has to sabotage me. She thinks I can fail all on my own.* And Diana had proven her right.

"Hey," Maeve said, giving Diana's shoulders a squeeze. "There will be other races, and—"

Maeve seized Diana's arm. Her eyes rolled back and she swayed on her feet.

"Maeve!" Diana gasped. Maeve crumpled to her knees. Diana curled an arm around her waist, supporting her. Her friend's skin felt wrong. It was too hot to the touch. "What's the matter? What is it?"

"I don't know," Maeve panted, then bent double, releasing a low howl of pain. Diana felt it a second later, the echo of Maeve's anguish. All Amazons were connected by blood, even Diana through her mother. When one felt pain, they all shared it.

Women were already running toward them, Tek at the lead.

"What happened?" Tek asked, helping Diana raise Maeve to her feet.

Diana hurried to her room to change clothes and fill a traveling pack with a blanket, rope, lantern and flint, and the rolled bindings she used for her hands when sparring—they would do for bandages in a pinch. Four hours had passed since Diana had left Alia in the cave. The girl must be terrified. *Hera's crown, what if she tries to climb down?* Diana winced at the thought. Alia had all the substance of a bag of kindling. If she tried to get out of the cave, she'd only end up hurting herself. But there was no time to return to the cliffs. If Diana was going to fix this, she needed to speak to the Oracle before the Council did.

She opened a green enamel box that she kept by her bed, then hesitated. She had never been to see the Oracle, but Diana knew she was dangerous. She could see deep into an Amazon's heart and far into the future. In the smoke from her ritual fire, she tracked thousands of lives over thousands of years, watching the way the currents moved and what could be done to alter their courses. Access to her predictions always came with a steep cost. The most essential thing was to approach with an offering that would please her, something personal, essential to the supplicant.

The green enamel box held Diana's most cherished objects. She shoved the whole thing into her pack and ran down the stairs. She'd been pocketing food throughout the feast, but she stopped at the kitchen for a skin full of hot mulled wine. Though the kitchens were always a tangle of clatter and chaos, today the staff worked with grim determination and strange smells rose in billows of steam from the cook pots.

"Willow bark," said one of the cooks as Diana peeked beneath a lid. "We're extracting salicylic acid to help bring the fevers down." She handed over the goatskin. "You tell Maeve we hope she feels better soon."

All Diana said was "Thank you." She didn't want to add to her list of lies for the day.

The city streets were full of bustle and clamor as people ran back and forth with food, medicine, and supplies to shore up buildings damaged by the quakes. Diana pulled up her hood. She knew she should be at the center of it all, helping, but if her suspicions about Alia were right, then the only solution was to get her off the island as quickly as she could.

A glance at the harbor told her that stealing a boat would be close to impossible. The wind had risen to a full gale, and the sky had gone the color of slate. The docks were crawling with Amazons trying to secure the fleet before the storm descended in full force.

Diana took the eastern road out of the city, the most direct path to the Oracle's temple. It was bordered by groves of olive trees, and once she'd entered their shelter, she broke into a run, setting the fastest pace she dared.

Soon she left the olives behind, traversing vineyards and tidy rows of peach trees clustered with fruit, then passed into the low hills that bordered the marsh at the center of the island.

The closer Diana drew to the marsh, the more her unease grew. The marsh lay in the shadow of Mount Ptolema and was the only place on the

island that existed in a state of near-permanent shade. She had never ventured inside. There were stories of Amazons entering its depths to visit the Oracle and emerging weeping or completely mad. When Clarissa had sought an audience at the temple, she'd returned to the city gibbering and shaking, the blood vessels in both of her eyes broken, her nails bitten down to ragged stumps. She'd never spoken of what she'd seen, but to this day, Clarissa—a hardened soldier who liked to ride into battle armed with nothing but an axe and her courage—still slept with a lit lantern beside her bed.

Diana shivered as she entered the shadows of the marsh trees, draped in veils of moss like funeral-goers, the gnarled masses of their exposed roots reflecting sinister shapes in the murky waters. She could hear no sounds of the approaching storm, no familiar birdsong, not even the wind. The marsh had its own black music: the lap and splash of the water as something with a ridged back broke its surface and vanished with the flick of a long tail, the scuttle of insects, whispers that rose and fell without reason. Diana heard her name spoken, a chill breath at her ear. But when she turned, heart pounding, no one was there. She glimpsed something with long, hairy legs skittering over a nearby branch and quickened her steps.

Diana kept heading what she hoped was due east, farther into the marsh as the gloom deepened. She was sure now that something was following her, maybe several things. She could hear the rustle of their creeping legs above her. To her left, she could see the glint of what might be shiny black eyes between drooping swags of gray lace moss.

There is nothing to be afraid of here, she told herself, and she could almost hear the swamp's low, gurgling laugh.

With a shudder, she pushed through a curtain of vines bound together by milky clusters of cobwebs and stopped. She had imagined the Oracle's temple would be like the domed buildings in her history books, but now she was confronted with a dense thicket of tree roots, a woven barricade of branches that stretched as high and wide as a fortress wall. It was hard to tell if it had been constructed or if it had simply grown up out of the swamp. At its center was an opening, a gaping mouth of darkness deeper and blacker than any starless sky. From it emanated a low, discordant hum, the hungry murmur of a hive, a hornet's nest ready to crack open.

Diana gathered her courage, adjusted her pack, and stepped onto a path of wet black stones that led to the entry, leaping from one to the next across water the dull gray of a clouded mirror, her sandals slipping over their glossy backs.

The air near the entrance felt strangely thick. It lay heavy against her skin, damp and unpleasantly warm, wet as an animal's lolling tongue. She lit the lantern hanging from her pack, took a shallow breath, and stepped inside.

Instantly, the lamp went out. Diana heard whispering behind her and turned to see the roots knotting closed over the mouth of the tunnel. She lunged for the entrance, but it was too late. She was alone in the dark.

Her heart set a jackrabbit pace in her chest. Over the vibrating insect hum, she could hear the vines and roots shifting around her, and she was suddenly sure they would simply close in, trapping her in the tangled wall forever.

She forced herself to shuffle forward, hands held out before her. Her mother wouldn't be afraid of a few branches. Tek would probably give those roots one withering look and they'd literally wither.

The hum grew louder and more human, a sighing, keening sound that rose and fell like a child's weeping. *I'm not afraid. I am an Amazon and have nothing to fear from this island.* But this place felt older than the island. It felt older than everything.

Gradually, she realized the tunnel was sloping upward and that she could see the dim shapes of her hands, the woven-root texture of the walls. Somewhere up ahead, there was light.

The tunnel gave way to a round room, its ceiling open to the sky. It had been late afternoon when Diana set out, but the sky she was looking at now was black and full of stars. She panicked, wondering if she'd somehow lost time in the tunnel, and then she realized that the constellations above her were all wrong. Whatever sky she was seeing, it was not her own.

The bramble walls held torches alight with silver flames that gave no heat, and a moat of clear water ringed the room's perimeter. At its center, on a perfectly flat circle of stone, a cloaked woman sat beside a bronze brazier hanging from a tripod by a delicate chain. In it, a proper fire burned vibrant orange, sending a plume of smoke into the star-strewn sky.

The woman rose and her hood fell back, revealing coppery hair, freckled skin.

"Maeve!" Diana cried.

The giant was back. Alia thought that maybe after the wreck, in her panicked, adrenaline-fueled state, she'd exaggerated the details of her rescuer. But, no, the girl was back in the cave, and she was just as Alia remembered her—six feet tall and gorgeous, built like someone who could sell weird fitness equipment on late-night television. The Ab Blaster. The Biceps Monger.

Maybe I'm delirious. She knew she had a fever and chills, but she couldn't make sense of her symptoms. The headache and the nausea could be the result of a concussion. No doubt she'd been banged around pretty badly when the *Thetis* went down. But she didn't want to think about that—the shock of the explosion, Ray screaming, the gray weight of the water as it dragged her down. Every time her mind brushed up against it, her thoughts stuttered to a stop. Better to focus on the cave, the blanket tucked around her, the terrible pounding in her head. If it was just a bad concussion, then her job was to stay awake until help came—and she'd done it. Here was help. In the form of a girl who looked like a supermodel who moonlighted as a cage fighter. Or vice versa. But where was the rescue team? The helicopter? The EMTs to flash a light in Alia's eyes and tell her everything was going to be all right?

"Just you?" she croaked, unnerved by how weak her voice sounded.

The girl sat down beside her. "Have you eaten anything?"

"Not hungry."

"At least some water?" Alia didn't have the strength. Dimly, she was aware of something being pressed to her lips. "Drink," the girl commanded.

Alia managed a few sips. "Is help coming?"

The girl hesitated. "I'm afraid not."

Alia opened her eyes fully. She'd succeeded in keeping her panic in check so far, but she could feel it trying to claw free. "Is it the earthquakes?" At the first tremor, Alia had dragged herself to the cave opening, terrified the rock above her would give way and she'd be crushed. But one glance at the drop to the sea had sent her scrambling backward. She'd huddled in her blanket, fighting her rising fear. *One thing at a time,* she'd told herself. *I'm on an island—maybe there's volcanic activity. Just wait for help to come.* She'd done her part. She'd kept conscious, managed not to expend her energy on crying or screaming. So where was her rescue?

The girl's expression was troubled, her gaze trained on her sandaled feet. Alia realized she'd changed clothes. Back on the beach she'd worn some type of white tunic, but now she was in brown leather trousers and what looked like a cross between a tank top and a sports bra. "This island is very isolated," she said. "It's…Contacting help wasn't possible."

"Then the rest of the crew…?"

"I'm sorry. I wish I could have saved them all."

Her words didn't quite make sense to Alia. Nothing did. She closed her eyes, the ache of tears filling her throat. Her best friend, Nim, liked to joke that Alia was a jinx because trouble seemed to follow her everywhere. Fights

erupted at parties. Couples started arguing over nothing. Then there was that time a free concert in Central Park had somehow turned into a riot. It didn't seem so funny now.

Thinking about Nim, about home, about the safety of her own bed, made the tears spill over.

"Were they your close companions?" the girl asked quietly.

"I barely knew them," Alia admitted. "I need a doctor. There's something wrong. I think I hit my head during the wreck. There may be internal bleeding." Though even as she spoke, she realized that since the girl had appeared, the pain in her head had receded. Maybe she'd been more dehydrated than she realized.

"There was an explosion on your craft," said the girl. "Before it sank."

Alia leaned her head back against the cave wall. "I remember."

"On the beach, you said it was your fault."

Those words felt like a fist pressed against her heart. "I did? I must not have been thinking clearly."

"Do you think…Is it possible it was intentional? Some kind of bomb?"

Alia's eyes flew open. "What are you talking about?"

"Could the wreck have been deliberate?"

"No, of course not, it…" Alia hesitated. All of Jason's paranoid warnings came back to her. *We're targets, Alia. Our money. The Foundation. We have to be smart.*

Smart meant trained bodyguards on staff at the penthouse. It meant an armed driver to take her to school every morning and drop her off every afternoon. It meant no class field trips, schedules that accounted for every minute of her day so that Jason always knew where she was, summers spent in the same place each year, seeing the same people, staring out at the same view. It was a good view. Alia knew she had nothing to complain about. *But that didn't stop you, did it?* She'd been happy to whine to Nim on every occasion. And she'd pretty much jumped at a chance for something new, a month spent with different people, away from Jason's ridiculous rules.

Maybe not so ridiculous. Could someone have put a bomb aboard the boat? Could one of the crew have blown up the *Thetis* on purpose?

Her fears must have shown on her face, because the girl leaned forward and said, "Speak. Is it possible?"

Alia didn't want to believe it. If someone had been willing to blow up her boat, to murder innocent people just to get at her and the Foundation, then Jason had been right about everything and she'd been the biggest fool alive.

"It's possible," she admitted reluctantly. "I'm a Keralis."

"A Greek name."

"My dad was Greek. My mom was black, from New Orleans." People always wanted to know where the color came from. Alia reached for the water. She really did feel a little better, though her hand shook as she lifted the skin to her lips. The girl steadied Alia's arm as she drank. "Thanks. You've never heard of the Keralis Foundation? Keralis Labs?"

"No. What does that have to do with the explosion?"

Alia felt suddenly wary. "Who are you?"

"I'm…My name's Diana."

"Diana what?"

"Why does my name matter?"

Why? Because even if this girl lived on a remote island, *everyone* knew the Keralis name. That was part of the problem.

They worked for the better part of an hour. The earthquakes were coming more frequently now, and occasionally bits of the cliff would shake free behind them. Alia had tried to help for a while, but eventually she'd given up and leaned against the makeshift raft, her breath coming in shallow gasps. Diana could see just how ashen she looked beneath her brown skin.

She'd seemed better when they were climbing and Diana had been close to her. *Your proximity may prolong her life, may even soothe her, but it cannot heal her. She will die, and the island will live.* Alia was dying, and though Diana still felt well, she could sense the pain and bewilderment of her sisters through the blood tie that connected all Amazons. What one of them felt, they all felt, and to fight, even to spar, meant to endure the pain of your opponent, even as you dealt the blow. If one of them died…No, Diana would not allow it.

"Hold on, Maeve," she whispered.

They lashed together the raft as best they could, and then Diana raised the sail, tying strands of Khione's mane into the knots of the rigging. With each knot, another section of the raft vanished. It would be invisible from the shores of Themyscira and the southern coast of Greece. Diana hoped to put the raft in as close as possible to Gytheio. From there it would be a two-day journey on foot to Therapne. She doubted Alia could make faster time than that in her current state. Perhaps they could acquire one of the machines she'd read about.

"Do you know how to drive an automobile?" asked Diana as she secured the raft's makeshift rudder.

"A car? Nope. No reason to learn in New York."

Diana frowned. "Well, even on foot, we should have plenty of time to reach the spring before the start of Hekatombaion."

"And Hekatombaion is what exactly?"

"The first month in the old Greek calendar. It used to mark the start of the year."

"Got it. Hekatombaion. Party at the spring. All the cool kids will be there."

"Who are the cool kids?"

"Ouch. Okay, you and I will be there."

Diana had the distinct sense that Alia didn't intend to be at the spring at all, but she could worry about that later. She braided a strand of Khione's mane into her own hair and did the same for Alia, then helped her board and bent to grab the edges of the raft.

Diana shoved the raft forward into the water. She leapt atop it, feeling the surf surge beneath her. She let out the sail the barest amount and set her hand to the tiller.

As they raced over the sea, Diana glanced back at the little cove, watching it grow smaller with every passing second. *It's not too late,* she thought. *Turn back. Let the island do its work.* Instead, she told Alia to ease the sail and

watched the wind fill the canvas. The raft shot forward over the crest of another wave, sliding down the other side with a stomach-lurching drop.

They passed the rocks that marked the boundary and entered the mists. There was no shift in temperature this time, and Diana wasn't sure she'd know when they'd made the crossing. The waves seemed wilder here, but it was hard to tell. Then Alia tilted her head to the sky and took a deep breath. Diana could see the color in her cheeks returning. Were the earthquakes ceasing on Themyscira? Was Maeve opening her eyes? Or would some sacrifice be demanded to purge the island of Alia's influence?

Diana looked back at her home. She'd never been this far out before, never seen the island from such a great distance. The mists parted briefly and she could see its shape, the curve of its coastline, the towers of the Epheseum at one end and the great dome of Bana-Mighdall at the other, the crests and valleys of its mountains like a green odalisque.

The mists closed. Themyscira was gone. If she tried to return now, would the island know her? Would she be able to find it? Would it welcome her back?

Back to what? a dark voice inside her asked. What if she could return? What if the Oracle didn't tell Hippolyta how horribly she'd betrayed her people? If she remained on the island, she would only ever be Hippolyta's coddled daughter. She would never be allowed to find her way.

Hippolyta could claim that Diana was an Amazon, but before everything else, Diana was her daughter, too precious, too breakable to risk. And that was how the other Amazons would always see her: not as a true sister, but as their queen's child. She would forever be an outsider, a weakness to exploit.

But if she made things right, if she got Alia to the spring, it wouldn't just be a mission; it would be a *quest,* a hero's journey, like those set before champions in times of old. The line of Warbringers would be broken. Alia would live, war would be prevented, and Diana would have proven herself. By then, Hippolyta and Tek would know all about Diana's transgression. She would have to face a trial before the Amazon Council, but Diana had to believe she would be forgiven. To stop the cycle of Warbringers? To prevent not just one war but countless future wars? That was a deed worthy of an Amazon. There would be punishment, but surely not exile. *You will still have to look Maeve in the eye and tell her that you were the cause of her suffering*. That would be the worst punishment, the hardest to endure, and there was no question Diana deserved it.

Of course, she might fail. She might save this one girl and plunge the earth into an age of war, a war that might reach beyond the bounds of the mortal world to her home. Diana remembered the vision of her mother's body lying lifeless on the field, the accusation in Tek's dying eyes, the ground turned to ash, the smell of blood and burnt flesh in the air, that hideous creature with the head of a jackal. Her mistake might cost them everything.

No. There had to be a reason she'd been the one to see the *Thetis* sink, the one to pull Alia from the sea. She'd been given a chance to help bring peace to the world and to end the cycle of war that lived in Alia's blood. She would not fail. And she would not let fear choose her path.

The mist was cold, and the surf bucked beneath them like a living thing. Diana reached into her pocket and took hold of the heartstone. She could feel its faceted edges hard against her palm.

"Alia," she called over the wind. "Take my hand."

Alia lurched across the length of the raft to the stern. She grasped Diana's hand, wet from rain and sea spray, the heartstone tight between their palms.

"Ready?" Diana asked, keeping her other hand on the tiller.

"Ready," Alia said with a firm nod.

Diana felt a grin break over her face. "Destiny is waiting."

She focused on her memory of the map of Greece, the Gulf of Laconia, the divot in its southern shore. *Guide us,* she willed.

Nothing happened.

Diana had the sudden, mortifying thought that maybe she'd misunderstood how the heartstone worked. What if her will wasn't strong enough to direct it? They'd be lost on the sea, stuck on this raft, and she would never see Themyscira again.

Then the raft began to spin, slowly at first, gaining momentum. The waters rose, turning in a spiral, forming a wall around them—a column of gray sea and writhing foam, churning faster and faster, higher and higher until the sky was barely a pinprick of light far above.

With a loud *crack,* the sail ripped free and vanished up the flume. The raft shook, breaking apart beneath them.

"Don't let go!" shouted Diana, holding tight to Alia.

"Are you kidding?" Alia screamed back.

They were soaked through, huddled over the rudder on their knees, their palms pressed together so tightly, Diana could feel the edges of the jewel cutting into her flesh.

Tek was right. The gods are angry. They'd never wanted her on the island. It was the worst kind of hubris to think they'd sent Alia to her as a chance at greatness. They'd sent Alia as a lure, and now she and the Warbringer would die together, consumed by the great mouth of the sea.

The roar of the churning water filled her ears, rattling her skull, the wind and salt lashing at her with such force that she could not keep her eyes open. She huddled against Alia, felt her pulse—or was it Diana's own?—in the press of their palms.

All at once, the world went silent. The roar did not quiet but simply vanished. Diana opened her eyes as the column fell in a great tumble of water, drenching them and sending the raft rocking as the sea sloshed beneath them. Mist clung to the broken stump of the mast as the raft swayed, then stopped, the waters eerily still.

They were shrouded in darkness. Had night fallen in the mortal world? Had they lost or gained time when they used the heartstone?

They were still moving, carried by a strong tide, but the surf had calmed to the barest ripple.

Diana and Alia stared at each other. Alia's hair hung in a wet mass of braids, her eyes wide and round as newly minted coins. Diana suspected she looked just as stunned.

"Did it work?" Alia said.

Slowly, they unclasped their hands. The heartstone was covered in their blood. Diana wiped it clean on her wet trousers and slipped it into her pocket.

She looked around. The raft was nearly half the size it had been when they left the island. The mast was in pieces, bits of rope and rigging hanging from it limply. Through the mists, Diana saw the first twinkle of lights. They were brighter than the lanterns of Themyscira, steadier than torchlight, hard pinpricks that glinted like captured stars—white, pale blue, gold, silvery green.

"It worked," Diana said, only half believing it herself. "It actually worked." She'd done it. She'd left Themyscira. She'd crossed over into the World of Man.

The lights multiplied around them on both sides, more of them than she ever could have imagined. Diana could hear water slapping at the sides of the raft, and something else, deep and resonant—ships' horns, a sound she'd only ever heard from a great distance on the island.

But the lights were too close, too bright, too plentiful. Had she brought them that near to a city? And why did the Ionian Sea feel flat as a millpond?

The mists cleared, and Diana glimpsed another light burning high in the sky, different from the others, a vibrant yellow torch held aloft by the statue of an Amazon, her stern face framed by a crown like a sunburst, her gown hanging in gray-green folds of weathered copper. Behind her, Diana could see the lights of a vast bridge.

"This isn't right," Diana said, standing slowly. "This isn't Greece."

Alia threw her head back and laughed, a sound of pure exuberance and relief and…pride.

"No way," Alia whispered. She spread her arms wide, as if she could take the whole city into them, as if all of these lights had been lit to greet only her. "Welcome to the greatest city in the world, Diana. This is New York." She whooped and turned her face to the sky. "This is home!"

What have I done? The air felt strange on Diana's skin, gritty in her lungs. She could *taste* it in her mouth, dank and ashy against her tongue. The lights onshore seemed less like stars now than the bright reflection of predators' eyes, wolves waiting in the dark.

She whirled on Alia. "What did you do?"

Alia held up her hands. "You were the one steering."

"The *heartstone* was steering. I thought of the spring. I focused on the coast of…" Her words trailed off as she looked at Alia's relieved, happy face. The heartstone was supposed to heed the desires of the woman who commanded it. Apparently, Alia's will had been greater. "You were thinking of home." She could not keep the accusation from her voice.

Alia shrugged. "Sorry?"

"I don't think you are."

A horn bellowed, closer this time, as a barge passed, trailed by a rolling wake that struck the remnants of their raft. They stumbled, managed to right themselves, but the raft was taking on water fast. *Think,* Diana scolded herself. The heartstone could only be used to leave Themyscira or return to it. She could use it to take them back to the island, then try again, but could Diana risk bringing the Warbringer back there? Would Alia or the island survive that?

To the east, she saw the beginnings of dawn tipping the sky gray. Her eyes scanned the horizon. New York. The island of Manhattan. Diana knew the maps well enough from her studies, knew she was thousands of miles from Therapne and the spring and any kind of hope.

She released a frustrated moan. "How did this happen?"

Alia smiled slightly. "I've been saying that all day."

Had it only been a day? That morning, Diana's sole worry had been losing a race. Now she had abandoned the only home and the only life she knew, and possibly doomed the world to a bloody age of war. Apparently she had a gift for disaster.

Make a new plan, she told herself. *Soldiers adapt.*

"We need to get to shore," she said decisively. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Of course, they had no mast, no sail, and no way to steer. "We're going to have to swim."

Alia shuddered. "First rule of New York living: Do not swim in the Hudson. Do you know how polluted this water is?"

Diana eyed the river. It was an opaque blue verging on slate. It looked nothing like the clear waters of home. Still…

"Water is water," she said, with more confidence than she felt. The wind and sea had torn the strand of Khione's mane from Alia's braids, and Diana's own braid had come loose as well. They would be visible once they left the raft, but there was nothing to be done about it. She wrapped her arm around Alia.

"I can swim!" Alia protested.

“It’s dark out. I’m not taking any chances,” said Diana. And now that they were back in the mortal world, she wasn’t entirely sure that Alia wouldn’t just paddle away on her own.

Diana plunged them both into the river, and her whole body recoiled. The cold she had expected, but the water *felt* wrong. It was dense and clammy, like a moist palm clenching around her.

“Hey!” Alia complained, wriggling in her grasp. “Whoa, whoa, head *east,* toward Manhattan. Otherwise we’ll end up in Jersey.”

Diana kicked hard, eager to get them out of this…soup as fast as possible. Suddenly, Alia stiffened in her arms.

“What is it?” Diana asked. “Are the poisons of the water affecting you?”

“I remember.”

“Remember what?”

“*This*. You saving me from the wreck.”

“That seems unlikely. You were unconscious.”

Alia’s back was to her, but Diana felt her small shrug. “I remember the water turning warm.” She paused. “I remember thinking everything was going to be okay.”

Diana could hear the relief in her voice, the conviction that things had turned out all right. *She thinks she’s safe now,* Diana realized. *She thinks this is over*.

“There,” Alia said, craning her neck. “Straight ahead. That’s Battery Park.”

In the gray light, Diana could just make out the hulking shape rising from the water, and as they drew closer…She squinted. “Are those cannons?”

“They used to be. There’s a war memorial.”

Her mother had told her the mortal world was pocked with memorials and monuments to loss. *They build with steel and stone and promise to remember,* she’d said. *But they never do.*

“That’s the ferry,” said Alia as they crossed the wake of a slow-moving ship. “If they see us—”

“Take a breath.”

“But—”

Diana didn’t wait for an argument. She dunked them beneath the surface, continuing to swim. She wasn’t sure how long a mortal could hold her breath, but she counted twenty seconds.

As they reemerged, Alia hauled in a long breath and spat river water. “Oh God, water up the nose,” she gasped. “You’re lucky I’m so happy to be home.”

“I’m glad you’re in such a good mood,” Diana muttered.

“I’m being crushed by a grumpy giant and I probably just swallowed toxic waste, but, yeah, I am.”

Diana eased her hold slightly. It wasn’t fair to punish Alia for her desperation to return home. But that didn’t change the predicament they were in. Hekatombaion would begin with the rise of the new moon, and it was

possible that they'd lost more than just a few hours when they'd broken through to the mortal world.

Diana saw ships moored near the park, their decks and masts still lit by a glittering spangle of lights, but would a ship be fast enough to get them to Greece in time? Diana thought of the planes she and Maeve had sometimes glimpsed above Themyscira. That was what she needed. She just had no idea where to get one.

When they reached the dock, Diana shifted her grip on Alia and grabbed hold of a pylon.

"Hold on to my neck," she instructed. She'd expected an argument, but apparently Alia's happy mood had made her compliant. She locked her arms over Diana's shoulders without a single complaint. Even her grip was stronger away from Themyscira. If she was faring this well away from the island, Diana could only hope Alia's absence would have a similar effect on Maeve.

Diana climbed the pylon and hauled them up to the dock, depositing Alia on the pavement with a thud. Alia flopped onto her back and flapped her arms back and forth.

"What are you doing?" said Diana.

"Making snow angels."

"There's no snow."

"Okay," admitted Alia, "I'm celebrating."

Diana turned her back on Alia and the slate expanse of the river, intending to declare there was absolutely nothing to celebrate about this debacle, when she got her first real look at the city.

Her breath caught. She'd thought Ephesus and Bana-Mighdall were cities, but if that was the case, then maybe a different word was needed for the massive, spiky, dazzling thing before her. It rose in peaks and ridges, a jagged mountain range that should have run a hundred miles, but that had been crammed into a single narrow space, folded onto itself in hard angles and bright reflective planes like some grand formation of mica. And it was *alive*. Even in what should have been the still-sleeping hours of dawn, the city was moving. Motorcars. Electric lights blinking in different colors. People on foot with steaming paper cups in their hands, newspapers tucked beneath their arms.

It was like facing the Oracle all over again—the terror of staring into the unknown. The thrill of it.

"You all right?" asked Alia, pushing herself up from the dock and trying to wring some of the water from her bedraggled yellow shirt.

"I don't know," Diana said honestly.

"You've really never left that island?"

"You saw how easy it is to leave my home."

"Good point."

A man jogged by, wiping the sweat from his brow and singing loudly to himself. He was tall and lean and *hairy*.

"He has a beard!" Diana said in wonder.

"Yeah, that's kind of a thing now."

Diana cocked her head to the side as the man belted out something that sounded like "concrete jungles where dreams tomato" and vanished down the path. "Are males generally tone-deaf?"

"No, but believe me when I say you don't want to hear Jason attempt karaoke."

Diana took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind. She could not let this place overwhelm or distract her. She had a mission to complete.

"Where can we get an airplane?"

Alia limped past her down the running path and into the park. "We don't need a plane. We need a bath, a hot meal." She waved at her bare feet. *"Shoes."*

Diana caught up and moved to block her route. "Alia, you can't go home."

"Diana—"

"The people who tried to kill you believe the Warbringer is dead. We need to make sure it stays that way until we reach the spring." Alia opened her mouth to argue, but Diana cut her off. "I know you don't believe me, but you also know the explosion on that boat was no accident."

Alia paused, then nodded slowly. "I know."

Diana felt a surge of gratitude. She'd feared Alia would try to deny everything that had happened now that she was on familiar ground. "Then you have to know it's safer for everyone if your enemies believe you're dead."

Alia scrubbed a hand over her face. "You're saying if I try to go home I could be putting Jason in danger."

"Yes."

"I can't just let my brother think I'm dead. He could be a target, too."

"Once we reach the spring—"

"Stop talking about the spring. We have no way to get there. We don't have any money, and I'm guessing you don't have a passport."

"What's a passport?"

"Exactly. Let's deal with one thing at a time. I can call Jason—"

Diana shook her head. "Someone knew how to find you on that boat. They could be monitoring your location through your brother."

Diana could see Alia's disbelief warring with her desire to keep her family safe.

"I guess I—" Alia began. A bicycle whirred past them, and Diana yanked her from its path.

"Jerk!" Alia yelled after him.

The bicyclist glanced back once and held up his middle finger.

"Is he an enemy?" Diana asked.

"No, he's a New Yorker. Let's sit. I need to think."

They found the nearest bench, and Diana made herself sit, be still. She wanted to act, not pause to ponder, but she needed Alia on her side if they had any hope of getting to the spring.

“Okay,” said Alia, chewing her lower lip. “We can’t go to a bank because we don’t have ID. And you’re basically telling me I can’t go home or to the Keralis offices because everyone thinks I’m dead.”

“And we want to keep it that way.”

“Right. So I’m home, but if I follow your rules, I’m still completely stranded.”

Diana could hear the frustration and fatigue in her voice. She hesitated. She knew she was asking a great deal of Alia, but she had to. The stakes were too high for either of them to flinch.

“After everything you’ve seen,” she said, “after what we just dared, can you at least trust me enough to try to keep you from harm?”

Alia touched her fingers briefly to the bracelet on Diana’s left wrist, a thoughtful look on her face. Was she remembering what had happened in the Armory?

“Maybe,” Alia said at last. “At least now Jason’s going to have something real to be paranoid about.” Her head snapped up. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?”

Alia leapt up from the bench. “I know what to do. And now that I know I’m not going to die, I’m starving.”

“But you said yourself we have no money. Do we have something to barter?”

“No, but I happen to know of a bank that doesn’t require ID.”

“Very well,” Diana said. For now, she had little choice but to follow Alia’s lead. She would get her bearings, gather her resources. “I’m glad to leave this place. The smell in this part of the city is intolerable.”

Alia bit her lip. “Yeah, *this*

Alia kept one eye on the entrance to the parking garage, trying not to look like she was studying it too closely, and doing her best to ignore the way her stomach was growling. She could have eaten every single thing in that bakery display.

"You intend to steal a car?" Diana sputtered.

"Why would I steal a car I can't drive?" Alia said, hoping she sounded calmer than she felt. At this point she was getting by on bravado alone. It had been nerve-racking enough to hop the turnstiles on the subway—something she'd never done without Nim to egg her on—and now she was basically about to commit a crime. It wasn't as if Jason would press charges, but she wasn't big on the idea of getting caught. Everything in her was screaming, *Go home. Hit reset.*

She was on her own turf now. She should feel calmer, more confident than she had on the island, but she never did well in crowds, and Manhattan was basically one big crowd.

She watched one of the attendants vanish into the recesses of the garage. The other was on the phone in the office, just visible through the glass. This might be their only opportunity to get inside. "Look, you asked me to trust you; now I'm asking you to trust me."

Diana's dark brows lowered, and she huffed out a breath. "Very well."

A huge vote of confidence from the Cult Island delegation. "Good," said Alia, hoping she sounded sure of herself. "First task is to get past those attendants without them noticing us." She loped quickly across the street and then dropped into her best crouch as she slunk along the wall, relieved that Diana followed.

"This feels like law breaking," Diana whispered as they crept up the ramp.

"I mean, we're not *really* breaking any laws. We're just circumventing some bureaucratic challenges."

Alia led them past the booth and to the stairwell, hoping they wouldn't run into the other attendant as they climbed.

When they reached the third floor, she pushed the door open. It was quiet up here, the air cool in the dark. The only sounds were the occasional squeal of tires or the rumble of an engine echoing from somewhere in the cavernous building. She counted the spaces. She'd never actually been to this garage, but she knew the number she was looking for—321. March twenty-first, her mother's birthday.

318, 319, 320…Could this possibly be it? Alia felt a little deflated. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but the car was a disappointingly dull Toyota Camry. Of course, it was possible she'd gotten this all wrong. What if the space number was her parents' anniversary and not her mother's birthday? What if Jason wasn't using this garage anymore?

She peered through the driver's-side window. The interior of the car was spotless: empty drink holders, a receipt folded on the dashboard, and there,

hanging from the rearview mirror, a pendant emblazoned with a fleur-de-lis—the symbol of New Orleans, Lina Mayeux's hometown. Alia's mother had once confided she'd contemplated getting a tattoo of the fleur-de-lis to remind her of home. *What changed your mind?* Alia had asked her. Her mother had just winked. *Who says I have?*

Alia blinked back an embarrassing prickle of tears.

"Okay," she said. "Don't freak out, but we're going to have to break the window."

"Why?"

"We don't have a key, and I need to get into the trunk."

"But it's your car?"

"My brother's."

"Perhaps I can get the trunk open without the key."

Diana gripped the lip of the trunk just above the license plate and yanked upward. Instead of the latch giving, the metal of the trunk peeled upward with a shriek. Diana bit her lip and stepped back. The rear of the car looked like an open coin purse. "Sorry about that."

Alia listened for the patter of running footsteps, but apparently the attendants either hadn't heard one of their cars being torn apart or hadn't cared. She looked at the gaping trunk, then back at Diana. "So you're the weak one in your family, huh?"

Alia and Diana peered into the trunk. There was an industrial-size flashlight, jumper cables, and a gigantic canvas duffel.

"Bless you, Jason, you paranoid loon."

"What is it?"

"A bug-out bag." Alia hefted the duffel from the trunk, laid it on the ground, and unzipped it. "Jason has them stashed all around the city in case of emergency. In Brooklyn, too." Alia ignored most of the gear—a tarp and tent, a water-purification system, rain ponchos, matches, freeze-dried meals. She set aside the first-aid kit. Her feet would be grateful for that later. "It's basically everything you'd need to survive an apocalypse."

"Is he so sure one will come?" Diana asked.

"No, he's just a control freak. Jason is basically the biggest Boy Scout ever. He likes to be prepared for every possibility."

"But that's impossible."

"Try telling *him* that. Aha!" Triumphantly, Alia held up a huge wad of cash. "We're rich!"

"Is it enough for an airplane?"

At least Diana was consistent. "Maybe a model airplane. It's only a thousand dollars, but it's enough to get us a room and something to eat while we figure out what to do next."

Alia didn't miss the troubled expression that crossed Diana's face. She knew Diana truly believed in all of this Warbringer stuff, an age of bloodshed, the magical spring. Alia wasn't sure what she thought. She couldn't deny the bizarre things she'd seen over the last twenty-four hours, or the fact that they

had somehow traveled all the way from the Aegean to the Hudson River in what had felt like the blink of an eye.

Part of her still wanted to believe it was all a vivid dream, that she would wake up in her bedroom on Central Park West having never left for Istanbul at all. But that part of her was growing less and less convincing. Being back in Manhattan should have made Diana's island seem more like a fantasy, but there was something about seeing this girl walk and talk in such an ordinary place that made everything that had come before feel even realer. It was like looking out a familiar window and seeing an entirely new view.

“Stay here,” said Diana, wishing that she hadn’t taken quite as hard a stance on weaponry back on Themyscira.

“But how could they have found me?” Alia protested in hushed tones.

“We don’t know what forces are working against you. Be silent and be still. And if anything happens to me…” Diana trailed off. She didn’t know how to finish that sentence. She supposed she should try to extract a promise from Alia that she would attempt to reach the spring on her own. But there was no time for oaths. “Run.” Alia nodded, her eyes wide.

Diana’s feet were bare from the shower. She padded silently down the narrow passage that led past the bathroom, the feel of the carpet’s rough fibers strange against her skin. She crept the last few feet, her heart thudding hard in her chest. This would be a fight—a real fight, not a sparring match in the Armory.

She paused, waiting. Silence. Had she imagined the whole thing? Had her overstimulated mind fabricated an intruder? Another guest might have simply mistaken their room for his, tried his key, and, realizing his mistake, moved along.

The door rattled slightly again. Someone was trying to tamper with the lock. She heard a click as the tumblers gave way. There was no time to think.

Diana bent her knees and kicked, her foot connecting hard at the very center of the door. It flew off its hinges, and she heard a surprised cry as the door crashed into the intruder, driving him back against the wall.

She registered a large form—a young male, about her height, broad in the shoulders. Good reflexes. He recovered quickly, shifting into fighting stance, and they faced each other in the dim light of the hallway, circling.

He lunged toward her. She seized his shoulders, twisting to the side to bring him down, using his momentum, but he adjusted his stance—*very* good reflexes—and regained his balance. He was strong, too, surprisingly so. Diana found it was a bit like reaching for a pitcher and discovering it full instead of empty—unexpected, but no great challenge.

She shifted her grip. The fabric of her attacker’s shirt bunched in her hands as she slammed him against the wall. The plaster splintered. He groaned, and she shoved him to the floor, pinning him facedown, one arm extended, the tendons bending as she applied pressure.

“I’ll break it,” she said as he struggled against her. “Be still.”

“Diana!” Alia was standing beside the destroyed door, staring down at them in shock.

“I told you to remain in the room.”

“Diana—”

“The situation is under control. Whoever dispatched this assassin sent a weakling.”

The young man beneath her grunted, trying to wriggle free.

She gave a tug on his arm, and he froze. “Who sent you?” she growled.

Alia clapped her hands over her mouth. She bent double, shoulders shaking, and for a moment, Diana thought she was weeping—but she was laughing. Was she having some kind of hysterical fit?

“Diana,” she gasped, “that weakling is my brother.”

Diana looked down at the male in her grip, his face planted in the hallway’s dirty green carpet. “Are…are you sure?”

Alia barked a laugh. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

Diana changed her hold, flipping the intruder so that he was pinned by her knees, and peered into his furious face. His gaze blazed with anger, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Now that she looked, she supposed he wasn’t dressed like an assassin. He wore a clean white shirt of fine cotton unbuttoned at the throat, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His head was shaved, though not quite smooth, and he had the same dark liquid eyes and brown skin as Alia. In fact, now that she was looking at him properly, the resemblance was striking.

“Why did you attack me?” she said.

“You attacked *me*.”

Diana winced. So she had. “Well, why were you trying to break into our room?”

He bucked once beneath her, and she used her body weight to shove him back to the floor. Brother or not, she didn’t know his intentions. “I was looking for my sister,” he snarled. “Who the hell *are* you?”

Alia cleared her throat. “Maybe you should let him up.”

“He’s in no danger. I’m not hurting him.”

“I’m pretty sure his ego is permanently bruised, and I don’t know what might be hiding in that carpet.”

“We should search him for weapons.”

“Diana, he’s my *brother*. Let him up.”

Reluctantly, Diana rocked back on her heels and stood, releasing him. She offered him a hand, but he ignored it, making what she thought was an unnecessarily dramatic show of shaking out his arm.

He came up to his knees and, in a single swift movement, yanked a gun from a holster near his ankle as he leapt to his feet. “You should have searched me for weapons.”

“Jason!” Alia yelped.

“I’m just making a point. If—”

Diana had never seen a gun outside of the pages of a book, but she’d been trained to disarm an assailant. Her hand snapped forward, striking the pressure points of his wrist. The gun dropped from his grip, and in the next breath she had him up against the wall, cheek pressed to the plaster.

“I was just making a point!” Jason said. “I was agreeing with you… whoever you are. Alia, will you call her off?”

“I’m not sure I should. What are you doing with a gun, Jason?”

"I have it for protection!"

"How's that working out for you?"

Diana gave him a little shove. "Alia hasn't been out of my sight once. How did you find us?"

"The trunk with the go-bag is equipped with an alarm in case of theft," he said. "You triggered it when you broke in, although I have no idea what you did to that poor car. I asked the attendants if they'd seen anyone coming or going with a red backpack, and they remembered you two."

"But how did you find the hotel?"

"The cell phone in the backpack."

"A phone?"

"Yes," he grunted. "There's a burner phone in every go-bag. I followed the signal here."

"Did you know this?" asked Diana, but the guilt on Alia's face told her all she needed to know. She remembered how Alia had asked her to put the duffel back in the trunk. Had she done it deliberately so Diana would turn her back? She was surprised at how much the betrayal stung.

"Diana, I need to ask you to unhand my brother. Again."

Grudgingly, Diana released him, but this time she patted him down. She decided not to think too much about the fact that she was in such close proximity to a male—friend or foe—and ignored his sharp "Hey!" when she ran her hand up his thigh.

"You pulled a gun on us," she said. "Your discomfort is your own doing."

"I'm trying to teach Alia to be more cautious," he complained.

"Lesson learned, big brother. Was it worth it?"

Diana stepped back and Alia's brother turned, straightening the collar of his shirt.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Reassured."

She expected another round of recriminations, but instead Jason turned to Alia. He crossed the short distance between them and pulled her into a tight hug. "I thought…We had word the *Thetis* had lost contact. I didn't know what to think."

"I'm okay," Alia said, but Diana could hear the wobble in her voice.

Diana was embarrassed by the acute pang of envy she felt. She would have liked someone to lean on, to tell her she hadn't made a terrible mistake, that she wasn't in this alone.

Then Jason broke the hug and held Alia at arm's length. "How could you be so stupid?"

"I'm not stupid," she said, knocking Jason's hands away and folding her arms.

"Do you have any idea how worried I've been? The *Thetis* lost radio contact almost a week ago."

"A week?" said Alia.

Diana's heart lurched. A week gone? They must have lost time when they left the island. Hekatombaion began with the rise of the first visible new moon after the summer solstice—the slender white scythe of the reaping moon. How long did they have?

"When was the last full moon?" said Diana.

Jason stared at her as if she'd gone mad. "What?"

"I need a calendar."

He scowled and handed over the boxlike device she realized was his phone.

She touched the screen tentatively. "I don't—"

He snatched it from her and jabbed at it a few times before holding it up. They'd reached the end of June. According to the screen, the last full moon had been on June twentieth, and that meant Hekatombaion would begin on July seventh. They had less than a week to get to the spring.

Jason shoved his phone back in his pocket. "You disappeared," he said to Alia. "They sent out search parties. I thought…" His voice broke. "For God's sake, Alia, I thought you were dead."

"But I'm not, Jason. I'm here."

"How is that even possible? They said you boarded the boat in Istanbul. Did you change your mind?"

"I—"

"Everything okay up here?" The Bulgarian from the front desk stood panting at the end of the hall. It had taken him long enough to come investigate.

As one, they moved to block his view of the demolished door. "Everything's great!" said Alia.

"You bet," said Jason.

"Vsichko e nared. Molya, varnete se kam zanimaniyata si," said Diana as reassuringly as she could.

The Bulgarian made an unconvinced "huh" sound and started back down the stairs.

"Should I even ask?" said Alia.

"I just told him that all was well and instructed him to return to what he was doing."

"Not suspicious at all," said Jason. Diana saw Alia bite back a smile.

She bristled. "It was a perfectly reasonable thing to say."

"Let's get inside before he changes his mind and comes back to take a closer look," said Jason. "Help me with the door."

"Diana can just—" Alia began, and Diana gave a frantic shake of her head. It was one thing for Alia to know how strong she was, but the less Jason knew about where she was from or what she could do, the better.

"Just what?" said Jason, already hefting one side of the door.

"Just help," Alia finished weakly.

They shuffled into the passageway and got the door wedged shut behind them. Somehow the room looked smaller and shabbier with Alia's brother standing inside it. Despite the fact that he'd just been in a fight, he looked unrumpled and immaculate, the white of his shirt unsullied, a heavy watch glinting at his wrist. Could she convince this boy of her cause? Could she convince Alia? She'd thought she would have time to make her case and get them to Greece. Now she had only a few days.

Jason turned a slow circle, taking in the room's bleak furnishings, the plastic bags of candy. "I've been trying to call in favors with the Turkish government, and you're having a slumber party."

"That's not what this is," Alia objected.

Jason threw his hands up in exasperation. "Then what is it? What are you doing in a place like this, Alia? And how did you get here?"

Diana sat down on the bed. Alia had lied to her. "You said you wouldn't call him."

"I didn't," said Alia.

"But you knew he would trace you."

"I thought he *might*."

"What difference does it make?" asked Jason irritably. He turned to Diana, touching his hand to his shoulder as if it still pained him. "*Who are you?* And what right do you have to keep my sister from contacting me?"

Diana felt her temper rise. "It was for her own protection. Gods," she said shooting up from the bed as realization struck. "You could have been followed. We should leave this place immediately."

"Gods?" said Jason. "Plural?"

"No one is looking for me," insisted Alia. "They think I'm dead."

Jason released a growl. "Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

Alia bounced nervously on her heels. "Can we all just…sit down for a minute?"

Jason glanced at the nearest bed, his lip curling slightly. With a disdainful flick, he shoved a pile of sweets away and sat down at the edge of the bed. He glanced around. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"Warm soda?" Alia said, offering him a bottle of cola.

"I was hoping for something stronger."

Alia raised a brow. "Seriously?"

"I'm twenty-one—"

"Barely."

"And I just got pounced by this…*person*."

"My name is Diana."

Jason took the soda bottle from Alia. "Diana what?"

She answered without thinking. "Diana, Princess of—"

"Diana Prince," Alia said hurriedly. "Her name is Diana Prince."

"Yes," said Diana, grateful for the rescue, even if she was still angry at Alia. "Diana Prince."

Alia sat down on the other bed and gestured for Diana to join her. Reluctantly, Diana settled on the farthest corner.

Jason took a gulp of soda. “Start talking, Alia.”

“There was an accident.”

Diana held Alia’s gaze. They couldn’t afford this pretense. “It wasn’t an accident.”

Alia took a deep breath. “Okay, there was an explosion aboard the *Thetis*. Someone…” She hesitated, and Diana realized this was the first time Alia had spoken the words out loud. She’d let Diana make the claim, agreed with her as far as she was able, but she’d never acknowledged the fact of what had happened herself. “I think someone tried to kill me.”

Jason set down the bottle with a loud clunk. “I told you not to go. You know what kind of threats the Foundation gets. I told you how dangerous it was for you to be without security.”

Alia dropped her eyes. “I didn’t think—”

“No, you didn’t. You could have been killed.”

“I would have been. But Diana saved me.”

“How?”

“I saw the explosion from shore.”

“And you brought her all the way back to New York?”

“It seemed the safest thing.”

Jason’s expression was sour. “Well, at least someone was thinking.”

“That isn’t fair,” Alia said quietly.

“Fair?” Jason leaned forward. “You almost died. I almost lost you. After what happened to Mom and Dad—”

“I—”

“If you wanted to go so badly, you should have talked to me. We could have arranged an expedition.”

Alia sprang to her feet. “I didn’t *want* a Keralis expedition,” she said, pacing back and forth in the tiny room. “I wanted to be a student. Like a normal kid. Like everyone else.”

“We aren’t like everyone else, Alia. Our family doesn’t have that luxury.”

Diana hadn’t meant to speak. This wasn’t her battle. But she still found herself saying, “She was right to try.”

“Excuse me?” said Jason.

“It’s not just to ask someone to live half a life,” Diana said. “You can’t live in fear. You make things happen or they happen to you.”

Jason turned his cold, angry gaze on her. “People died. Alia could have been killed.”

“And if she’d remained in New York, she might have been targeted here.”

Now Jason was on his feet. “I don’t know who you think you are, but I’ve had about enough of being scolded by a teenage girl.”

Diana rose and met his eye. “I could be a man of fifty and you’d still be just as wrong.”

Jason snatched up the red backpack and started toward the door. “We’re leaving, Alia.”

Diana stepped into his path. “No.”

A muscle ticked in Jason’s jaw. “Get out of my way.”

“You said yourself that she’s in danger. If people are watching you—”

“I can keep my own sister safe. We have an extensive security team of trained professionals.”

“And you trust these people?”

“More than I trust a stranger in sweatpants who slammed me against a wall and speaks Bulgarian.”

“Tell me,” said Diana. “When Alia called you from Istanbul, did you relay her location and the details of her situation to your security team?”

“Of course. I—” Jason stopped and his face turned ashen. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, then paced slowly back to the bed. He sat down heavily, his gaze stunned.

“Jason?” said Alia.

“It’s my fault. There must be someone on staff…But I don’t get it. Why would they go after Alia? I’m closer to the company. Why didn’t they come after me?”

Diana almost felt sorry for him. “You’re fighting the wrong battle,” she said gently. “I know you think this is about your family’s business, but Alia is the real target.”

“Diana—” Alia said warningly.

“What are you talking about?” said Jason.

Alia tugged on Diana’s wrist. “Just leave it be.”

“Why?”

“Because you sound insane when you talk about that stuff,” Alia whispered furiously. “Oracles, Warbringers, magic springs—”

Jason’s head snapped up. “What did you say?”

“It’s nothing,” said Alia. “Just some goofy new age stuff Diana got from… her weird family.”

“What do you know about Warbringers?” Jason was on his feet again, and his face was deadly serious.

Alia cut her brother a baffled glance. “What do *you* know about Warbringers?”

“It’s…it’s something I found in Mom and Dad’s papers. After the accident.”

The information seemed to strike Alia with physical force. She took a half step backward. *“What?”*

“I had to go through all of their documents. There was a safe in the office. I can show you.”

“Why didn’t you show me before?”

"Because it was all so out there. I didn't…There was enough to deal with after they died. I had my hands full. And this was just so wild, all of this bizarre stuff about Dad's Greek ancestors. I didn't want to put that burden on you."

"What *burden*?" Alia said, her voice rising, panic creeping in.

"The burden of your bloodline," said Diana. She wasn't angry anymore. If anything, she felt only regret. She remembered visiting the Soldiers' Pantheon at the Armory, walking hand in hand with her mother past the glass cases, surrounded by blue light, listening to the stories of the Amazons, the courage they'd shown in battle, the greatness of their deeds, their homes, their families, their people, their gods. *What's my story?* she'd asked her mother. *It hasn't been written yet,* Hippolyta had said with a smile. But as the years passed, Diana had started to hate that memory, the knowledge that her story had been flawed from the start.

"Jason?" Alia asked, her fists clenched.

"It's just a bunch of legends, Alia."

"Tell me," she demanded. "Tell me all of it."

Jason looked to Diana almost helplessly. “I don’t know where to start.”

Alia ground her teeth together. She wasn’t mad exactly—no, that wasn’t true, she *was* angry, off-the-charts angry that Jason had kept this from her—but more than needing to punch him in the face, she needed to know what he knew.

“Just *start,*” she said, leashing her rage.

But it was Diana who spoke. “Warbringers are descendants of Helen of Troy.”

Of all the things Alia had been expecting, that wasn’t one of them. “Helen,” she said skeptically. “As in ‘the face that launched a thousand ships’?”

“It wasn’t her face,” said Diana. “Helen’s power lay not in her beauty but in her very blood. The birth of a Warbringer signals an age of conflict. If the Warbringer dies before Hekatombaion in her seventeenth year, no war will come. But if her powers are allowed to reach maturity—”

Alia held up her hands. “I know *you*

Kill me. Diana wanted to drive those words from her mind the second Alia spoke them. And she'd said them so easily. *Too easily,* Diana decided. Alia was just frightened, shaken by what she'd learned. None of it would matter when they reached the spring.

Jason made a quick phone call and ushered them out through the hotel's back entrance in case anyone was watching the premises. Diana could at least appreciate that he'd taken some of her warnings seriously.

The alley behind the hotel was pungent with smells Diana's mind could barely make sense of—a rotting vegetable stink coupled with what she thought might be urine and human feces, all of it made worse by the summer heat.

They passed through the back of a cleaning facility, crowded with moving racks of clothing packed in plastic, the cloyingly sweet steam welcome after the alley. Then they crossed the street and raced down the sidewalk to another alley, where a sleek black car was idling.

"Hey, Dez," Alia called to the driver as they climbed inside.

"Hey, Al."

Diana noticed Alia didn't correct the driver's use of the nickname the way she had with her brother.

The air inside the car was crisp and fresh, and Diana allowed herself a small, contented sigh as the sweat cooled on her skin. She was surprised at how pleasant the vehicle was inside, spacious and dark as a cave, its black seats stitched with a precision that could never be accomplished by hand. Jason poured himself a drink from a bar tucked in the car's paneling, and Diana watched the streets slide by slowly through glass tinted dark as smoke, the sounds of the street muted in a heavy, comforting hush. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of leather and something she couldn't quite identify.

"What are you doing?" Jason said abruptly. He was seated across from Diana, watching her closely.

"I did nothing."

"You were smelling the car." He turned to Alia. "She was *smelling* the car."

Diana felt her cheeks color slightly. "It has a pleasing aroma."

"It's new-car smell," Alia said, a smile twitching her lips. "Everyone loves that. And Jason is so uptight about keeping the car clean, Betsy never lost it."

"Betsy?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "Alia insists on naming every car. How has Diana Prince, Origins Unknown, never smelled a new car?"

"They don't drive where she's from," Alia said smoothly. "They're almost Amish."

"Amish with combat training?"

Diana ignored the jab. "Why can't we leave for the spring immediately?"

"The annual board meeting for Keralis Labs is tonight, followed by the reception for the Keralis Foundation's donors. We'll leave as soon as it's over."

Diana sat forward, the appealing smell of the car forgotten. “You want us to stay in New York for a *party*?”

“It isn’t a party; it’s a reception. Our family is the face of the Foundation. And if we want to keep it that way, I need to be there. Alia should attend, too.”

“A public event?” Diana could hear her pitch rising, but she simply couldn’t believe what he was saying.

“It’s hardly public. It’s a private event at the Temple of Dendur.”

Diana frowned. “So it’s a type of holy rite?”

Jason took a long sip of his drink. “Where did you find her? It’s a permanent exhibit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. People throw galas there all the time.”

“Galas,” said Diana. “I believe that’s another word for *parties*.”

“Hold up,” said Alia. “What do you mean, *‘if we want to keep it that way’*? How can there be a Keralis Foundation without Keralises?”

Jason leaned back in his seat. Diana knew that he was only a few years older than Alia, but there was a weariness in him that made him seem older. “You don’t go to the board meetings, Alia. You don’t read the reports. The Foundation’s been taking a beating in the press recently. The company’s profits have slowed. The board doesn’t take us seriously. If we want to be a part of our parents’ legacy, we have to step up.”

“You’re saying the board is going to try to keep you from taking control?” Alia said.

“Michael is worried,” Jason admitted, his gaze troubled. “It’s one thing for me to be involved with a charity, but no one is that excited about a twenty-one-year-old taking over a multibillion-dollar corporation.”

“Who’s Michael?” asked Diana.

“Michael Santos,” said Alia. “Our godfather. He’s been running Keralis Labs since our parents…since the accident. But now that Jason’s coming of age—”

“He wants me to take more responsibility.”

Alia fiddled with the hem of her T-shirt, then said, “Would it be such a bad thing for you to let Michael run the company awhile longer? You could finish up at MIT, go to grad school—”

“I don’t need a degree,” Jason said sharply. “I just need a lab.” Diana wondered if he was trying to convince Alia or himself. “And I can’t miss the meeting tonight,” he continued. “It would mean a lot for us to present a united front at the reception.”

“This is absurd,” said Diana. “Alia can’t possibly attend.”

To her surprise, Alia said, “Agreed. One hundred percent.”

Jason pursed his lips. “You’re only saying that because you hate getting dressed up.”

“I feel like death threats are a totally legitimate reason not to put on a gown.”

"No one would know you're going to be there," said Jason. "I thought you were going to be on that stupid boat trip—"

"Not stupid," grumbled Alia.

"So everyone else still thinks you're abroad. And the people who attacked the *Thetis* believe you're at the bottom of the sea. They won't expect you to be at a party in New York tonight. No one will."

"But if she's spotted—" Diana began.

"Then that can only work for us. By the time word reaches anyone that she's been seen in New York, we'll be on a plane bound for Greece and they'll be chasing their tails in Manhattan. The security will be top rate." He leaned forward. "Alia, if it wasn't safe, you know I would never suggest it."

"That's true," Alia conceded reluctantly. "He's really uptight."

"Cautious," Jason corrected.

Diana considered Jason's bunched shoulders and clenched jaw. "He does seem highly strung."

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe it's because WNBA players jump me in hotel rooms."

Diana shrugged. "If you try to break into a woman's chambers, you should expect to be trounced."

"Trounced?" he said indignantly. "You took me by surprise."

"I had you facedown on the floor."

"Would you two quit it?" said Alia. "I need a minute to think."

Diana crossed her arms and stared through the window, telling herself to take note of her surroundings, biting her tongue against the flood of words that wanted to break free. The *arrogance* of this boy, so sure in his power, buttressed by the trappings of his wealth. It was possible Alia's power was increasing her irritation toward him. *Or maybe he's just irritating*.

The car turned off of the street and entered a dark corridor that led underground. If this was where Alia and her brother lived, she supposed that with the vehicle's tinted windows, someone observing Jason's comings and goings from afar would have no way of knowing he hadn't returned to the building alone. They passed row after row of gleaming automobiles far sleeker than those they'd seen in the other parking garage.

"Home, sweet home," Alia said, her face melancholy.

"You may not be glad to be here," said Jason quietly. "But I'm glad to have you back."

Alia looked down at her hands, and Diana thought she understood her sadness. Alia had sought adventure and independence but had found only failure and suffering. Diana wondered if she would feel that same sadness returning to Themyscira. If she ever could return. She didn't want to think about that possibility. She'd hungered for the chance at a hero's quest, and heroes didn't get homesick. Better to focus on the task at hand: ensuring Alia's safety and getting to the spring.

The driver pulled the car around to an unobtrusive-looking set of metal doors.

“Is this secure?” Diana asked as they exited the vehicle and Jason pushed a button.

“This elevator is reserved for the penthouse,” said Jason. “No one else has access.”

Diana looked around warily as the doors slid open and they entered the little room. They had elevators on Themyscira that were operated by pulleys and used for moving heavy or unwieldy cargo. Aside from the panel of buttons to the right of the door, she supposed this was no different, even if it was more luxuriously appointed. Its floor was carpeted, its walls mirrored. She caught a glimpse of her reflection, dark hair still damp from the shower, rumpled T-shirt, blue eyes a bit dazed. She looked like a stranger. Jason’s gaze met hers in the mirror, and she realized he’d been watching her again. He took a key from his pocket, inserted it into a lock beside the panel, and pressed *P*.

The elevator lurched, and Diana attempted to keep her face neutral as they shot upward, leaving her stomach somewhere near her feet. This was *not* like the elevators on Themyscira.

She took a deep breath through her nose and tried to keep her mind off the horrible sensation in her gut and instead concentrate on what Jason had said about the elevator’s security. So what if access to the penthouse was restricted? There had to be stairs somewhere. And if someone was determined enough, they could simply take down the whole building with explosives. What were a few more lives lost if a world war could be prevented?

A moment later, the elevator jounced to a halt, and the doors opened into a cavernous hallway, two stories high. Sunshine streamed in through a skylight, illuminating a staircase of polished wood that swept up one paneled wall, and floors set in a spiral mosaic of black and white tiles.

Alia hovered halfway up the stairs in the entry as Diana strode from the kitchen. How did she manage to make a crappy drugstore T-shirt look regal?

"What did Jason say?" she asked. "Was he horrible?"

"Yes," said Diana as she followed her up the steps. "I suppose his motives are good, but his manner makes me want to—"

"Stab him with a pencil?"

"Not exactly that," said Diana. "But he's certainly irritating."

The phone buzzed, and Alia bounced on her toes with a happy whoop. "Nim is on her way!"

"It would be best if she wasn't seen entering the building."

Alia paused, her foot on the stair above her. It was too easy to slide out of the reality of her situation. It was like her mind couldn't accept what was happening, so it just kept defaulting to the ordinary.

She sent a text to Nim telling her to take a car and use the private elevator. They could send Perez down with a key.

"Can she be trusted, this Nim?" asked Diana.

"Definitely. But let's spare her all the Warbringer talk, yeah?"

At the top of the stairs, Alia hesitated. She longed for her room, her clothes, a good long nap. Instead, she made herself turn right and follow the hallway, the skylights casting squares of sunshine on the black-and-white paneled floor.

"The pattern is different here," Diana noted.

"Yeah, the tiles in the entry hall make a fractal. This is a DNA sequence." Alia shrugged. "That's what happens when you give nerds money."

She stopped before the double doors to her parents' office, her hands resting on the handles, then took a deep breath and pushed them open.

There was a time when this had been her favorite room in the apartment. Its walls were lined with bookshelves paneled in the same warm wood as the staircase, and a huge fireplace took up half of one wall. A small table and two chairs had been positioned in front of the cold grate, and a paperback lay open on one of the armrests, just where Lina Keralis had left it. *Death in the Air,* by Agatha Christie.

"Mom loved mysteries," Alia said, touching the cracked spine of the book lightly. "And thrillers. She liked puzzles. She said they helped her relax."

Diana ran her hand along the stone mantel, pausing to pick up a photograph. "Are these your parents?"

Alia nodded. "And Neil deGrasse Tyson in the middle."

Diana set the frame down gently. "This room is so different from the rest of your home."

It was true. Her parents had kept the rest of the penthouse light and airy, but the office looked like they'd stolen the library from some English manor house. "My parents loved this kind of old-world stuff."

“Well, old is relative,” Diana murmured, and Alia remembered her claim that the walls on her island dated back three thousand years.

“They said they worked in a sterile white lab all day; they wanted to feel like they were escaping when they came home.”

Again, Alia touched her hand to the spine of the book on her mother’s chair. A decanter with two glasses beside it sat on a low table. It all felt so immediate, as if they might return at any moment. Alia knew it was a little creepy, definitely depressing, but she couldn’t quite make herself close that book.

“I just can’t believe my mom would have kept such a huge secret from me,” she said.

“Maybe she didn’t want you to feel different,” Diana said. “Maybe she wanted you to have a chance at being like everyone else.”

Alia snorted. “Not much hope of that.” She crossed to the double desk where her parents had liked to work across from each other.

“Why?”

She plunked herself down in her father’s old chair and used the edge of the desk to give herself a shove, sending herself spinning. “Well, Nim and I are the only brown girls in my grade, and two of about ten in the whole school.” She switched directions, launching herself into another spin. “I’m a complete science nerd.” She spun again. “And I’m more comfortable reading than at parties. So, yeah, not much chance at normal. Besides, you should have seen me when I had braces.”

“Braces?”

“For my teeth?” Alia bared her teeth. “Let me guess, yours are just naturally straight and pearly white.” She tapped her fingers over the desk. “I know Mom had a safe for her jewelry and stuff, but I don’t know where it is.”

“There’s a panel beside the Faith Ringgold,” Jason said from the doorway.

He strode behind the desk and slid open a panel next to the framed quilt, revealing a heavy-looking safe set into the wall. He entered a long combination into its keypad, then pressed his fingertip to a red screen. Alia heard a soft metallic whir and a click. He pulled open the safe’s door.

“Here,” he said, handing Alia a flash drive. “Most of the files are on this. They kept hard copies, too, if you want them. And this.” He drew a slender metal case from the safe and set it on the desk.

Alia cast a wary eye at the box. “What is it?”

“A record of all the known Warbringers. I don’t know where they got it or how it’s passed from one family to another.”

Alia flipped the latch and lifted the lid. There was a scroll inside, yellowing parchment wrapped around a spool of polished wood. She touched her fingers to it briefly, then drew her hand back. How much did she want to know?

But that wasn’t the way a scientist thought. It wasn’t the way her parents had taught her to think.

She lifted the scroll from the box and began to unroll it. She’d expected some kind of family tree, but it was more like a time line. The inscriptions were

made in several different languages, names and dates scrawled in different hands, different inks, one a rusty brown that might be blood.

The first words were written in Greek. “What does this mean?” Alia said, fingers hovering over the entry.

“Helen—” Diana and Jason began at the same time.

“Daughter of Nemesis,” Diana continued. “Goddess of divine retribution, born with war in her blood, first of the *haptandrai.*”

“Wait a minute,” Alia protested. “I thought Helen was supposed to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda. You know, the swan?”

“That’s one story. In others, Helen and her brothers were the children of Zeus and Nemesis and were only fostered by Leda.”

“Divine retribution,” said Alia. “That’s…cheerful.”

“She was also known as Adrasteia.”

“The inescapable,” said Jason.

“I bet she’s fun to have around.” Alia furrowed her brow. “You said that word before. *Haptandrai.*”

Jason nodded. “The meaning is a little cloudy. The root can mean to ignite or to assail, but also just to touch.”

“The hand of war,” murmured Diana.

Alia stared at Jason. “Did you brush up on Greek because Dad was Greek or because of this Warbringer thing?”

“A little of both,” he admitted.

Alia wasn’t too surprised. Jason had always been more interested in their Keralis side than their Mayeux side.

“Your translation isn’t entirely accurate, though,” Diana said. “The root can mean other things. To grab, to grapple with, to couple with.”

“Couple with?” squeaked Alia.

“I did not need to know that,” said Jason.

Diana shrugged. “It makes a kind of sense. Helen wasn’t just one thing, and there can be many reasons for war.”

Alia didn’t want to ponder that too deeply. She turned her focus back to the scroll, unfurling it a bit more. She was wrong; it looked less like a time line than a cross between a seismograph and an EKG. Each girl’s name was followed by a series of peaks tagged with incidents of conflict, each peak larger than the last, like foothills rising to mountains, culminating in a sharp apex of violence that ran in a spiky range across the top of the scroll until at last it dropped off again.

“Evgenia,” Alia murmured, touching her finger to one of the names inscribed on the parchment. “The Peloponnesian War. It looks like it lasted nearly sixty years.”

“Longer,” said Jason. “It was the beginning of the end for Greek democracy.”

“Livia Caprenia,” she said. “The Sack of Rome. Angeline de Sonnac, the Seventh Crusade.” Her fingers jumped from era to era in no particular order,

from girl to girl, tragedy to tragedy. “The Hundred Years’ War. The Wars of the Roses. The Thirty Years’ War. Did they know?” Alia’s voice sounded shaky to her own ears. “Helen knew she was the cause of the Trojan War, but did these girls know what they were? What they caused just by breathing?”

“Maybe,” said Jason. “I don’t think so. How could they?”

“Someone was keeping these records,” Diana said.

Alia kept her eyes locked on the scroll. “Oh God. World War One. World War Two. You’re telling me we were the cause of that?”

“No,” said Diana. She braced her hand against Alia’s shoulder. “The Warbringer is a catalyst. Not a cause. You cannot take the blame for the violence men do.”

Alia drew in a sharp breath. “Look,” she said, jabbing her finger at the year 1945. Next to it was an annotation:

Diana found Alia flopped on a canopy bed heaped with snowy linens in a large chamber at the other end of the hall. This room had a floor inlaid with wood in the pattern of a huge sunburst, and one wall was painted with a misty view of a lake dappled with pale pink water lilies.

"Monet," Diana said, finding the name in a memory of one of her art history lessons.

"I was really into that story 'The Frog Prince' when I was a kid," Alia said to the ceiling. "Mom wasn't big on princesses, so we compromised with a lily pond."

But the wide windows that overlooked a vast swath of parkland had already captured Diana's gaze. From this height, the city was transformed. It was like looking into her mother's jewel case—a city of silver spires and mysterious ironwork, windows that glinted like gems in the afternoon light. The park was rigidly symmetrical in its boundaries, hard lines demarcating where it began and the city ended. It was as if someone had set a door into another world at the center of the city, someplace lush and green, but contained on all sides by strong magic.

Alia's room seemed full of small magics, too. Her desk was stacked with textbooks and a little hourglass sat beside the lamp, but the sand in it seemed to be lodged at the top. Diana shook it, then flipped it and gasped.

"Is the sand in this flowing upward?"

Alia rolled her head listlessly on the pillow. "Oh. Yeah. It's because of the density of the liquid inside it instead of air."

A framed photograph sat on the corner of the desk: a young Alia and Jason on a boardwalk, their hair braided into tight rows, Alia's head studded with plastic barrettes. Behind them stood the same couple Diana recognized from the photo in the study—a man with a craggy, friendly face, his blue eyes sparkling, his cheeks reddened by the sun, and a woman with dark-brown skin and a soft cloud of hair held back from her face by a cheerful red headband. They were all striking a silly pose, flexing their muscles like comic strongmen. Jason's smile was broad and open, his dimple carved deeply into his left cheek. Maybe Alia was right about how much he'd changed.

"And what are these?" Diana asked, pointing to a shelf of neatly stacked patterned boxes.

Alia groaned. "It's super nerdy."

"Tell me."

"I'm trying to collect the element that corresponds to my age every year for my birthday, like Oliver Sacks. He was a neuroscientist."

"I know. We have his books."

Alia lifted her head. "You do?"

"We try to keep up with the outside world."

Alia flopped back against the pillows. "Yeah, well, here's hoping I make it to argon."

Diana heard footsteps on the stairs and tensed, preparing herself. Alia might trust Nim, but Diana couldn't afford to.

The bedroom door banged open and a girl stormed through—though she was less like a girl and more like a human whirlwind. She wore open-toed boots that laced up to her dimpled knees and a smock dress that sparkled. The side of her head was shaved and the rest of her hair fell forward in a slick black sheaf that flopped over one eye. The other eye was black as jet and rimmed with gold, and her visible ear was studded with silver and gems all the way from lobe to top.

"I cannot *believe* you lasted all of what? A *week* in Turkey? I thought this was supposed to be the big adventure, Alia. The moment when you cast off your chains and—" The girl's voice broke off as she caught sight of Diana standing by the window. "Sweet mother of apples."

"Pardon?"

"Nim—" Alia said, a note of warning in her voice.

The girl strode forward. She was round cheeked, round shouldered, round everything.

"Poornima Chaudhary," she said. "You can call me Nim. Or whatever you like, honestly. God, how tall are you?"

"Nim!" snapped Alia.

"It's a totally reasonable question. All in the name of research. Your text said we need clothes." Nim hooked her hand around one of the bedposts and muttered, "Please tell me this girl is less of a pill than the last one you forced me to hang out with. No offense," she said to Diana. "But, excluding me, Alia basically has the worst taste in people ever." Her one visible eye narrowed. "Are those bruises? What the hell happened in Turkey?"

"Nothing," said Alia, fluffing her pillows and propping herself against them. "Boating accident. They had to cut the trip short."

Diana was surprised at how easily Alia delivered the lie. But how many tears had Diana hidden from Maeve? Some sorrows had to be borne alone.

Nim crossed her arms, bracelets jangling. "You look like you've been crying."

"The jet lag is just messing with me."

"You weren't *gone* long enough for jet lag."

"I—"

Nim held up her hands. "I'm not complaining. Summer in this dump of a city sucks without you." She cast Diana an assessing glance. "And you definitely know how to bring back a souvenir."

Alia tossed a pillow at her. "Nim, quit flirting. You are here for style-emergency purposes."

"Your life is a perpetual style emergency. So much money, so little chic. Am I right?" She turned to Diana. "Who are you exactly?"

Diana took in Nim's bright, inquisitive eyes, her head cocked to the side. She looked like a sparkly, round-cheeked sparrow. "Diana," she said, and smiled. "But you can call me Diana."

"Are you going to help us or not?" said Alia.

"Of course I am. I love spending your money. But how did Jason convince you to go to a party?"

"Guilt bomb."

"Typical. All right, my females," Nim said, whipping out a measuring tape and flipping open what Diana realized was a computer on Alia's desk. "Let's go shopping."

"We can't go out," said Diana, though she hated to dampen Nim's enthusiasm. "We're already taking enough risks."

Nim pulled out a pair of green plastic glasses and plunked them on her small nose. "What's that, now?"

"Jason's being strict on security again," Alia said hurriedly. "We've had some threats."

"Crazy, right?" Nim asked Diana. "Can you imagine living on lockdown?"

"Come on, Nim. It's not like I have that many places to go."

Nim waved her hand dismissively. "Someday, Alia, we will have all the places to go and all the clothes to go there in. And don't worry," she said to Diana. "The shopping comes to us."

They gathered around the computer on Alia's desk—Nim at the keyboard, Alia and Diana huddled behind her—and the next hour was a blur of confusing talk and images flying by on the tiny screen. Nim knew a great deal about textiles and design, and apparently, she'd helped Alia shop this way before. She took Diana's measurements, all while catching Alia up on how she'd spent the last two weeks, the course she'd just finished at some place called Parsons, and how disgusting the heat in the city had been.

Diana mostly listened and nodded, enjoying their chatter. Nim was a little like Maeve, but her cheer and boldness were somehow more vivid. It reminded Diana of the bright shelves of the drugstore, everything noisy with electric color, even the candy. *You dance differently when you know you won't live forever*. Was this what Maeve had meant? There was something reckless in mortal joy that Diana liked. It held nothing back.

"You're awfully quiet," Nim said, looking up at Diana suspiciously. She pushed back from the desk in her chair. "You're not silently seething over something I said, are you?"

Diana startled. "Not at all. Why would you think that?"

Nim shrugged, taking out her phone and sending another text to someone Diana thought she'd called Barney Buyer. "Nothing personal. I just never get along with Alia's friends. We tend to do better on our own."

"It's true," Alia said thoughtfully, leaning against her bookshelf.

"And we're delightful!" said Nim. "Even though Alia is a total jinx. If something can go wrong around her, it will. I swear, she's a drama magnet."

Alia gestured at the screen. "Focus." But Diana knew she was thinking about all of those tense moments, those disagreements, those broken opportunities for friendship in a new light.

Diana peered at Nim, whose head was cocked to the side as she sucked thoughtfully on her lower lip and tapped at the screen of her phone. *Did* Diana feel hostile toward her? She didn't think so. She'd wondered if her conflict with Jason had been influenced by Alia's powers, but she and Nim seemed to be getting along just fine. The Oracle had said Alia would not cause her to sicken; maybe her powers had no effect on Diana at all. "Nim, do you and Jason get on well?"

"As well as anyone can get along with that pill." Nim whirled in her seat and clutched a hand to her chest. "Don't tell me you're into him."

Alia banged her head against her bookshelf. "Can we not?"

Nim fluttered her fingers as if casting a spell. "Girls lose all sense around Jason Keralis."

"It's the billionaire factor," said Alia.

"It's not just the money: It's the cheekbones, the icy disposition. I had three kinds of a crush on your brother before I matured enough to realize he's a total bore."

"That isn't a secret, Nim. You used to steal his T-shirts."

Nim folded her arms, but her brown cheeks pinked. "So?"

"His *dirty* T-shirts."

Diana grimaced, but Nim didn't seem deterred.

"All I'm saying is most guys who are that rich and that young are either awful legacies with 'the third' after their names or gross Internet entrepreneurs. Jason's mad-science angle is hot."

Alia scoffed. "Could have fooled me."

"Totally different standard for girls. Guys don't care if you have a sexy brain."

Diana recoiled. "You can't mean that."

Alia tossed a pillow at Nim. "She *doesn't* mean it. Nim, you're the worst."

"I'm the best. And I can't help it if we live beneath the thumb of the patriarchy. Why don't you go yell at your brother for being a tool and only dating supermodels and socialites?"

"What's a supermodel?" Diana asked.

Nim stared at her.

"Uh, Diana's homeschooled," said Alia.

"Under a rock?" asked Nim.

"Her parents are just super weird. Hippies, kind of. You know, no TV, only public radio."

Nim took Diana's hand in both of hers. "I am so deeply sorry."

Diana raised a brow. "I manage."

"Do you?" Nim asked with a sincerity so profound Diana couldn't help laughing. Nim grabbed her other hand, holding Diana's wrists out. "Wow, cool bracelets. Are these soldered on?"

"Um, yes."

“I can’t even see a seam. That is some amazing craftsmanship. What are they? It’s got to be an alloy, but—”

“Nim makes jewelry,” Alia explained.

Nim dropped Diana’s hands. “Don’t say I make jewelry. That sounds like I’m someone with a BeDazzler and an Etsy shop. I make *art*.”

Alia rolled her eyes. “Okay, how about this? Nim is really good with textiles and just about everything else visual, and that’s why I invited her over to berate us.”

“Also I’m great company.”

Alia grinned. “That, too.”

“What makes these models super?” inquired Diana, still curious. “Do they have powers?”

Nim burst out laughing. “I *love* this girl. Yes, supermodels have the power to make you buy things you don’t need and feel terrible about yourself.”

Could that be true? “You used that word to describe me,” Diana said to Alia. “It doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

Alia hurled herself onto the bed and said, “It *is* a compliment. Nim just thinks she’s being clever.”

“Speaking of which,” Nim said, consulting her phone. “Marie pulled a bunch of clothes for us. They should be delivered in a couple of hours.” She hopped up on the bed and settled next to Alia. “Prepare for perfection.”

“I don’t need to be perfect,” Alia said. “Just passable.”

Nim held up her pinky. “Bubble, bubble.”

Alia sighed and hooked her pinky into Nim’s. “Make some trouble.” She cast a glance at Diana. “This all probably seems really silly to you, right?”

Diana wasn’t entirely sure what ritual she’d just witnessed, so she said, “The dresses? Attire is important. It sends a message to everyone you meet.”

“Yes!” Nim declared, fists held aloft in victory.

“Nooo,” wailed Alia, burying her head in the pillows. “Now there’s two of you.”

“You said as much in the drugstore,” Diana pointed out, leaning against the desk.

“But there’s a difference between looking respectable and saying, *Look at me!*”

“Perhaps you should think of it as armor,” suggested Diana. “When a warrior readies herself for battle, she doesn’t just worry about practicality.”

Alia rolled onto her side and propped her head on one hand. “I’d think not dying would be the big concern.”

“Yes, but the goal is also to intimidate. A general wears her rank. The same is true of athletes when they compete.”

“That’s true!” said Nim. “I read that football players play more aggressively when they’re dressed in black and red.”

“Nim loves trivia,” said Alia.

“I love *information*.”

Diana lifted Nim's measuring tape from the desk and curled it over one finger. "Where I'm from…I get a lot of attention because of my mother."

"Who's your mom? Is she famous?"

"Um…"

"Only locally," interjected Alia.

"Anyway," said Diana, "I know people will be judging, so I have to think about what to wear. My mother does, too. She's really good at it. And it isn't just about battle. Sometimes everything feels like a fight. You know, like just sitting through a dinner."

"Or walking down the street," said Nim.

"Or making it through an hour at a party," Alia said.

Diana found herself smiling. "It's just an hour. We'll manage it." And when that hour had passed, they would be on their way to the spring, on their way to changing the future.

A knock came at the door, and Jason ducked his head inside. "I need to head over to the meeting soon. Traffic's heavy."

"Tell me you're not wearing that to the party," said Nim.

Jason had donned a suit similar to the ones worn by the businessmen on the train.

He tugged at his cuff a bit self-consciously. "I'd planned to change into my tux at the office. And hello, Nim. So glad you can join us tonight."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Jay-jay."

"Meyers and Perez will escort you to the party. Dez will drive, but I got him to pick up a new car. If anyone's tracking our fleet, they're going to miss him coming and going." Jason held out a piece of paper that Nim snatched from his hand. "If you need to reach him, use this number. I got him an encrypted burner cell."

"An encrypted burner cell?" Alia repeated. "You just had one lying around?"

"Alia, what do I always tell you?"

"That you only watch reality TV as an anthropological exercise."

Nim cackled, and Jason rolled his eyes.

"No," he said. "Enjoy the best, but prepare for the worst."

"Wise, Jason," said Nim. "So wise. Ever notice how hard it is to enjoy something when you're preparing for the worst?"

He ignored her. "Theo and I will meet you at the party at eight thirty. Don't be late."

"Oh lord, *Theo's* coming?" said Nim. "Talk about preparing for the worst."

"And what about…" Diana hesitated. "Our ride home?"

Jason gave a single grim nod. "It will be ready to go." He shut the door.

"Thanks for the invite!" Nim called after him.

Jason's voice floated back through the door. "Just don't set fire to anything."

Nim pirouetted and struck a pose. “Nothing but the dance floor. Who’s hungry?”

—

A cold supper had been laid out for them in the kitchen, and Diana realized there must be staff here, servants who came and went barely seen. She hoped Jason’s faith in their loyalty was justified, and that both he and Alia were right about the party being a worthwhile risk. Even so, she was glad that they weren’t leaving for Greece right away. Once they’d broken the Warbringer line, Diana would have to return home to whatever consequences might be waiting. With Jason’s jet at the ready, she could at least enjoy a few more hours to observe the mortal world. There was so much to see, and if she was honest with herself, she could admit there was something to be said for being Diana Prince, something freeing about being judged on her own words and actions, instead of her origins or her mother’s choices.

As they hovered around the kitchen counter, piling food onto their plates, Diana wondered if Alia and Jason ever used the huge dining room or threw parties on their grand terrace. Or was it always just the two of them and the occasional trusted friend, sharing this huge home with the ghosts of Alia and Jason’s parents, eating standing up at their counter, looking out at the beautiful view?

Diana had felt so alone on Themyscira, but Alia was just as isolated in this massive city—maybe more so. The palace at the Epheseum was large, but it had been built as a communal space, one where people came and went to seek audience with their queen, where classes were taught. The women who served Diana and her mother were also their friends, the same people with whom they ate and trained. Everyone served Themyscira in some way, but they were all warriors, all equals. It was one of the reasons many believed there should be no queen at all, just an elected council. Maybe this quest would free both Diana and Alia. Maybe it would give Diana a chance to truly belong among her sisters and Alia the opportunity to live her life with some measure of peace.

“Funny how you neglected to mention that Theo Santos is going to be there tonight,” Nim said as she stuffed her mouth full of cheese.

“I didn’t know,” said Alia.

“You should have told me so I could better gauge how much cleavage you wanted to show.”

“First you’d have to find me some.”

“Who’s Theo Santos?” Diana asked, selecting a cluster of grapes from a bowl.

“Jason’s junior sidekick.”

“He’s a family friend,” said Alia.

“Hot in a gangly, not-hot-at-all way.”

“He’s objectively attractive,” Alia protested.

“He’s a complete loser. He spends all his time over here or in some dark room gaming and avoiding actual human contact.”

Alia tossed a carrot at Nim. “Actual human contact is overrated.”

When the dresses arrived, Perez went down to retrieve them with Nim in tow. They returned with two metal racks laden with large dark bags dangling from hangers, which Meyers helped carry upstairs. Diana felt a bit guilty watching them struggle up the steps, but she thought it best to let them manage on their own.

Back in Alia’s room, Nim immediately began unzipping the bags and yanking them off to reveal swaths of shimmering fabric and beading. There were several smaller bags filled with just shoe boxes and sheer wraps.

Alia sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

Diana nudged her with her elbow. “Armor, remember?”

Alia squared her shoulders and took her pile of dresses into the bathroom. “Those who are about to die salute you.”

“I don’t know why I even bother,” grumbled Nim as they perched on Alia’s bed to wait. “She always picks the most boring thing on the rack, always in basic black. If it’s shaped like a sack, even better.”

“Maybe it feels easier that way, just being invisible instead of always worrying what people think of you.”

Nim’s voice was surprisingly emphatic. “But that’s a choice, too, right? Because people are always going to look. They’re always going to judge, so you can say nothing or you can at least answer back.”

Diana had the sense that Nim wasn’t talking about Alia at all. The tiny girl’s clothes were distinctive, her manner of speech decisive. But her confidence was vibrant and spiky, like a bright flower guarded by thorns.

“What do you think people see when they look at you?”

Nim turned to her. “What do *you* see?”

“A bold girl. Talented and audacious.”

Nim dropped backward in an exaggerated swoon. “Could you just stay forever?”

“What was that thing you and Alia did?” Diana said, trying to remember. “Bubble, bubble….It was a play on Shakespeare, wasn’t it?”

Nim propped herself up on her elbows. “I know it’s goofy.”

“What does it mean?”

Nim slid off the bed and crossed the room to where a collage of her and Alia was propped on a dresser. She plucked a photo from the frame and held it up: three girls in shredded black robes with pointy hats. “When Alia and I were freshmen, we both got cast as witches in *Macbeth* along with this Thai kid, Preeda. That’s right, out of the whole school, they cast the three ethnic kids as witches. People would see us in the hall and pretend to shriek and cry. They thought it was hilarious.”

Diana had always regretted not growing up with other children, but that sounded awfully cruel. “What did you do?”

Nim tucked the photo back into the collage. “We just went for it. We cackled and went berserk every night and made sure to always get our lines wrong. Bubble, bubble.”

Diana smiled. “Make some trouble.”

“Come on, Alia!” Nim shouted at the closed bathroom door. “You have to pick one, and we all know it’s going to be the black dress with the long sleeves so you can schoolmarm it up—”

The door opened, and Nim’s jaw dropped.

“She didn’t pick the black one,” Diana observed.

“No shit,” breathed Nim.

Alia wore a dress of shimmering gold scales that moved like light glinting off water—no, like the sun off a warrior’s helm.

“Did you hit your head in Turkey?” Nim said in disbelief.

Alia grinned at Diana and cocked her hip. “Armor.”

They were more than a little late. Nim pinned up half of Alia's braids in a crown and wove a gold chain through them, then chose a garnet-colored jumpsuit for herself that she paired with terrifyingly high heels. She picked a strapless, midnight-blue gown for Diana. The fabric was of a fine quality, but it felt stiff around the waist and hugged her hips too tightly, as if it had been constructed with little thought to comfort.

"It looks good," said Alia. "Elegant."

Diana frowned. "I wish it had another slit up the side."

"One is classy, two is trashy," said Nim.

"One is pointless," replied Diana, wondering what refuse had to do with it. "Two would make it easier to run in."

"Pretty sure there's no red-carpet obstacle course," Alia said as Nim tossed Diana a slim silver bag.

"I'm going to need something larger."

"Why?" said Nim. "That clutch is perfect."

Diana removed the lasso from the plastic bag. "I need something for my things." Meyers and Perez would transfer the rest of their belongings, including her leathers, to the jet, but there was no way Diana was parting with her mother's lasso or the heartstone.

"What *is* that?" Nim said, reaching for the golden coils. "What is it made out of?"

Diana hesitated, then let Nim run her fingers over the glimmering fibers. "It's kind of an heirloom."

"I mean, it's gorgeous, but you can't carry it around like you're going to hog-tie the DJ."

"It will definitely attract attention," said Alia.

"Wait," Nim said. "Give me that."

Diana frowned, hesitant. "What are you going to do?"

"Eat it," Nim said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm not going to hurt it; just trust me." She laid the rope on the desk and turned her back to them, making little humming noises as she worked. A moment later, she hopped onto the desk chair and held up an open-work capelet of shimmering knots. It was somewhere between a shawl and a shrug. "Turn around, you magnificent tree."

Diana let Nim help her into the glittering creation and looked at herself in the mirror on the back of Alia's closet door. The lasso felt cool against her skin, its weight light over her shoulders, but it glinted like gold when she moved, as if her arms had hooked a field of falling stars.

"Perfect," said Nim with a happy sigh.

And it was. Bolder and more whimsical than anything she'd ever worn before. It was *fun*. She had always let her mother dictate what she wore, let her desire to belong, the wish to look like an *Amazon* make her choices. But

tonight she could look like anything she wanted. A laugh rose in her throat, and she spun in a circle, arms out, watching the gold flash at the corner of her eye. She felt transformed.

"Nim," said Diana happily. "You're a genius."

"Guilty as charged. But the hair is going up. This look needs more neck."

Nim pinned Diana's hair into a twist, and then they were racing down the stairs.

Meyers and Perez were waiting to escort them to the car and rode in the backseat with them the short distance to the museum.

"There it is," Alia said, pointing through the dark glass.

Diana glimpsed the outlines of windows, high and arched, glowing with light in the gathering dusk.

Dez continued on, and Diana realized he was circling the building so they could enter away from the main doors. When they stopped, Meyers and Perez spoke briefly into their sleeves. It took a moment for Diana to understand they were wearing communication devices. They exited the car first, and Diana saw more guards at the door, but she kept close to Alia anyway. She wasn't about to trust these men just because Jason did.

They entered a shadowy, high-ceilinged hall. In the distance, Diana could hear voices, the swell of music. She remembered being a little girl in the palace, falling asleep as the sounds of Amazon revels continued in the courtyard below. The museum felt a bit like that now, as if the adults were having a party while the rest of the building had been put to bed.

She saw two men approaching and shifted her stance so she could block their path to Alia.

"I said eight o'clock," said Jason's voice as he stepped into a well of light. "You—" His voice broke off abruptly as his eyes locked on Diana. There was that strange look she'd seen on male faces all morning: gaze stunned, mouth slightly ajar.

"What did I tell you?" murmured Nim. "I know what I'm doing."

Jason had changed since they'd seen him that afternoon. He still wore a suit, but it was sleek and black, and its lapels looked almost like burnished metal. He seemed to remember himself. A scowl broke over his face. "You're late."

Nim shrugged. "It takes time to look this good."

"You can work as hard as you want," said Jason's companion, a gangly boy with dark brown skin and hair that stood up from his crown in exuberant twists. "You'll never be as fine as me."

"What a surprise," said Nim. "Theo is with Jason. It's almost like he doesn't have something better to do with his time."

"Can we not start this tonight?" said Alia.

"That's right, Nim," Theo scolded. "Show some maturity. I don't want you poisoning the new girl's mind against me. Hi, New Girl."

"Theo," Jason said warningly.

"I just said hi! Not even hello! I kept it to one innocent syllable."

Theo Santos was a little shorter than Jason, and far leaner. He wore a snug suit of dark-green fabric with a showy sheen, and an open expression that made him look far younger than his friend.

"I stand corrected," Theo said, jamming his hands into the pockets of his trousers and rocking back on the heels of his pointy-toed shoes. "You guys are almost as gorgeous as I am."

"Weak," said Nim. "We're going to need a higher caliber of compliment."

"If I must," Theo said as they started toward the noise of the party bracketed by Meyers and Perez. "Nim, you look like a delicious confection, a walking, talking—probably poisonous—petit four."

"In that case," said Nim, "bite me."

"And you—" he said, looking at Diana. "You look like a star-spangled slice of hell yeah. Who are you, anyway?"

"She's one of Alia's friends, so leave her alone," said Jason.

"Don't mind him," said Theo. "He's just bitter because he got stuck with me as his date."

"I'd think he would be pleased to escort the most gorgeous among us," said Diana.

Theo barked a laugh. "Oh, I like her plenty."

"What about Alia?" said Nim.

"Shut up, Nim," Alia said under her breath.

Theo glanced over his shoulder and gave a cheerful thumbs-up. "Alia looks really nice, too!"

"Gosh, thanks," Alia muttered.

They entered a vast room teeming with people and echoing with sound. It was an extraordinary chamber. The far wall tilted at an angle like the side of a pyramid and was comprised entirely of windows that showed night falling over the park beyond. Partygoers sat at the edge of a rectangular reflecting pool bordered in slate stone, and others clustered around tables set with white orchids and glimmering candles. But the focus of the room was what Diana realized were ruins: a vast stone gate that she suspected had once led to a courtyard and the columned temple itself, covered in hieroglyphs.

My mother is older than these stones, she thought as they joined the swarm of guests. *In the mortal world, my people are the stuff of museums and myth. Legends. Artifacts.* Hippolyta and the first Amazons had vanished from the world long before this temple had been built. Diana looked at the partygoers, drinking, laughing, lifting glasses of wine to their lips. *Lives like the wing beat of a moth. There and then gone.*

"This room was designed to mimic the place where the temple was originally located," said Nim, eyes sparkling, as they made their way to one of the tall tables. Heads were already turning at the sight of Jason and Alia, hands lifted in greeting, beckoning them over. "The pool represents the Nile, and the windowed wall echoes the cliffs."

"You know what no one asked for?" Theo said. "Trivia."

Jason glanced at Theo. "Go find yourself some champagne."

Theo saluted. “That’s my kind of ultimatum.”

“Good riddance,” Nim said as he loped off. “I don’t know what it is about that guy, but I constantly want to shove him down a flight of stairs.”

“I have a pretty good guess,” murmured Alia.

“And he couldn’t even be bothered to pay you a proper compliment,” said Nim, her glare tracking Theo as he wended his way through the crowd.

“It’s fine,” said Alia, but Diana didn’t think that was true.

“I appreciate that you made an effort,” Jason said stiffly. His gaze touched briefly on Diana. “You look nice. All of you.”

“Very smooth,” said Nim. “You’re lucky you’re rich, or you’d never get any action at all.”

Diana waited for Jason’s sharp retort, but instead that broad grin reappeared, his dimple flashing. “You’re forgetting how good-looking I am.”

Alia rolled her eyes. “Can we just get this over with before I have to find a potted plant to throw up in?”

Jason straightened his cuffs, his sober demeanor returning as quickly as it had vanished. “Yes. But that’s the last eye roll for the next hour, deal?”

“Wait, I need one more. You can’t just cut me off like that.” Alia rolled her eyes theatrically. “Okay, I’m good.”

Jason’s mouth pulled up at one corner, as if he was fighting not to grin again. “I expect smiles and an attempt to look like you’re happy to be here.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Alia—”

Alia threw her shoulders back and pasted a cheerful smile on her face. “Better?”

“Slightly terrifying, but yes.”

“Hold on,” said Nim. “You need powder.”

As Nim touched up Alia’s makeup, Diana took the opportunity to murmur to Jason, “I saw the armed guards posted at the eastern and southern doors, as well as the entry.”

“But—”

“They’re spaced too evenly against the wall.”

“I’m not a fool,” said Jason. “There are members of the security team dressed as partygoers as well.”

“Two by the buffet, one by the musicians, and at least three near the western perimeter.”

Jason started, his surprise evident. “How the hell did you spot them?”

Diana frowned. It was obvious, wasn’t it? “I can tell they’re carrying weapons by the way their clothes hang. And they hold themselves differently than the other guests.” Jason’s eyes scanned the crowd, and she wondered if even he could tell where his people were. “Just stay alert,” Diana said. “If I can spot them, our enemies may be able to as well.”

She was prepared for a rebuke, but Jason simply nodded.

“Um, and you guys may want to keep moving,” Diana said as a nearby waiter shoved another waiter, knocking his tray of food to the floor. “Don’t stay in any one spot for too long.”

She still didn’t understand the limits of Alia’s power or how it worked. It could reach across worlds, but proximity did seem to matter.

“Understood,” said Jason.

“Are we doing this?” said Alia. “ ’Cause I’m thinking about drowning you in the punch bowl and just making a break for it.”

Jason nodded and offered her his arm. Under his breath, he said to Diana, “Keep us in your sights.”

“I’ll try not to get in your way,” she murmured.

He stiffened and then she saw the corner of his mouth twitch again. Still an imperious bully, but at least he could laugh at himself—and maybe he’d begun to realize she was an asset. She didn’t want to fight him every step of their journey to the spring.

Diana spent the next half hour drifting through the partygoers with Nim, making sure to keep Alia and Jason within view. It wasn’t easy. The room was crowded, and the way voices bounced off the stone set Diana’s teeth on edge. She also felt like she was trying to read too many signals at once. She’d successfully picked out most of Jason’s security team, but the party itself felt unwieldy.

On the surface, it didn’t look radically different from the celebrations on Themyscira. Though the clothes might be cut differently, it was still a collection of people in silks and satins, glasses in hand, some bored, others eager. But there was something odd about the way the crowd separated and then re-formed. The men would step forward to greet each other as their female companions hung back, then a moment later the women would engage, shake hands, possibly embrace. Power moved in its own way here, driven by unseen currents, and it eddied and flowed primarily around the men.

I don’t belong here. The thought echoed loudly through her head, but she wasn’t sure if it was her voice or the Oracle’s that spoke with such conviction. She shoved the thought away. In an hour, she’d be on her way to Greece. By this time tomorrow, they’d have reached the spring and her quest would be at its end. For these few moments, she could let herself enjoy the newness of this place.

She noticed Nim murmuring names under her breath. “Do you know everyone here?”

“No, but I know who they’re wearing.” She reeled off a series of Italian-sounding names.

“More trivia?”

“*Information*. Design is all about conveying information. This whole room was built to convey messages you don’t even know you’re receiving. The sightlines, the way the tiles are laid into the floor.”

“You see the world differently.”

“Seeing is easy. The hard part is being seen. It’s why I’m always trying to get Alia to go out more.” Nim plucked a skewered shrimp from a passing server. “When I started at Bennett, it felt like everywhere I went people weren’t seeing me. I mean, they *saw* me. Boy, did they see me. But I was just the short, fat Indian kid who brought weird food for lunch.”

“What changed?” asked Diana.

“Alia. She was the first person to look at my designs and tell me they were good. She even wore one of the first dresses I made to a dance. It was truly hideous.” Diana had to laugh, but that did seem like something Alia would do. “She’s always been the one to prop me up,” said Nim, “and make me stick with designing.”

“What about your family?”

“Please. They *have* to tell me I’m a good designer. That’s their job.”

Diana thought of her mother saying, *I didn’t expect you to win*. “Not necessarily.”

“Oh man, do you have one of those tough-love families? I just don’t buy into that.”

“Why not?” Diana asked cautiously.

“Because the whole world loves to tell us what we can’t do, that we aren’t good enough. The people in your own house should be on your side. It’s the people who never learn the word *impossible* who make history, because they’re the ones who keep trying.”

The very air seemed to crackle around her as she spoke. Diana considered telling Nim she’d make a great general, but opted for “Alia is lucky to have you as a friend.”

“Yeah, well, we’re both lucky. I don’t know many people who would put up with me.”

Alia caught sight of them by the reflecting pool and separated herself from the couple she and Jason were speaking to, scurrying over to them as if afraid Jason would snatch her back.

“Please kill me,” she moaned. “My cheeks ache from smiling, and my toes are throbbing in these shoes. I swear this is the longest hour of my life.”

“Boohoo. Big party where everyone wants to meet you,” said Nim. “And don’t you dare speak ill of those shoes. They’re perfection.”

“I can’t tell if your brother is pleased,” Diana said, glancing over at Jason, who was listening intently to someone and nodding his agreement. He seemed at ease, his posture relaxed, but Diana could see the tension in his shoulders. He held himself as if on guard, unsure of where the attack might come from, but certain it would come nonetheless. “He doesn’t like these parties, either, does he?”

“You noticed?” Alia said, scanning the crowd. “I hate who he becomes at these things. It’s like he’s an actor in a play. He smiles and chatters, but I know he hates every minute of it.”

“Speaking of hating every minute,” Nim said, her expression turning sour. Theo was headed their way. “I cannot take his nonsense right now. I’m going to go ask Gemma Rutledge to dance.”

“Is she gay?” asked Alia.

“Who cares? She’s wearing Badgley Mischka. I just want a better look at the dress.”

“Aw,” said Theo as he approached with two full flutes of champagne, “I chased Nim off. Such a shame. I swear that girl gets worse and worse.”

Alia pursed her lips. “Leave Nim alone.”

“Will do. All alone.”

“And what are you doing with champagne? None of us are old enough to drink.”

Theo took a big gulp from one of the glasses. “Don’t tell me you’re going to send me packing, too.”

Diana followed Theo’s gaze to where Jason had moved on to a group of young men, all of them with summer tans and artfully shaggy hair. Their raucous laughter, the way they took up the space around them, reminded her of the businessmen on the train. And there was something in the way they surveyed their surroundings….“They look at the room as if they own it.”

“You don’t say,” said Theo.

“Some of their fathers are on the board,” said Alia. “Jason’s just doing his job.”

“By joining the Legion of Bros?”

“Are they a club?” asked Diana.

“Pretty much,” said Theo. “And Jason’s hoping if I’m not around they’ll forget he’s black and teach him the secret handshake.”

Diana took a longer look at Jason, remembering what Alia had said about how the world saw her. Maybe Jason had good reason for the wary way he carried himself.

“Think of it like this,” Alia said. “If Jason waved you over, you’d actually have to make conversation with those guys.”

Theo shuddered. “They’d probably make me talk American football.”

“And how much they love the Red Hot Chili Peppers.”

Theo hissed. “Stop it.”

“And Dave Matthews,” Alia said ominously.

Theo threw his arms over his head. “You monster.”

Alia waggled her fingers at him. “And how they once saw Jimmy Buffett live at Myrtle Beach!”

Theo flopped across the table as if he’d been grievously wounded. “Save me, New Girl,” he rasped. “You’re my only hope.”

Diana had no idea what they were talking about, or the names of the demons Alia was invoking, but she moved one of the candles out of the way so Theo’s sleeve wouldn’t catch fire. “There,” she said. She nodded toward Jason,

who had detached himself from his friends and was heading toward them. “I’m afraid your reprieve may be over, Alia.”

“Quick,” she said, “stuff me under the buffet.”

“Too late,” Theo said, righting himself and taking another gulp of champagne.

“Have you come to drag me back already?” Alia asked Jason.

“You made a commitment.”

“Alia!” said a booming voice, and Diana saw Theo flinch. A barrel-chested man with a salt-and-pepper beard approached the table, with another man in tow. He swept Alia into a hug, then stepped back to look at her. “It’s been too long. Jason said you had summer travel plans.”

Alia smiled. “I didn’t want to miss the chance to meet some of the Foundation donors.”

Diana was impressed with how smoothly Alia lied, even as she realized how easy it must have been for her to pretend she intended to visit the spring with Diana or to toss the cell phone into the bag, knowing her brother would use its signal to track them. *Remember that,* she warned herself. *For all the dresses and the laughter and the ease you feel, remember how little you know these people, how easily deception comes to them.*

“I’m delighted you’re here and taking an interest,” said the bearded man. “You should have seen your brother at the board meeting earlier. He’s a natural.”

“I had a good teacher,” Jason said, though he looked pleased.

“Dad has always been great at telling people what to do,” said Theo, taking a swig of champagne. *Dad.* So the bearded man was Michael Santos, Theo’s father and Alia and Jason’s godfather. Next to him, they looked impossibly young.

Michael chuckled easily, but the mirth didn’t reach his hazel eyes. “I can always count on Theo to keep my ego in check.” He turned away from his son. “Alia, Jason, this is Dr. Milton Han. He’s doing fantastic work in environmental remediation, and I think he could take Keralis Labs in some interesting directions.”

Dr. Han shook Jason’s hand. “I knew your father at MIT. He was one of the smartest and most creative thinkers I ever met.”

“I can assure you we’re continuing in that tradition.”

“I was just reading about some exciting work in biofuels,” said Alia. “Is your research focused primarily on the use of bacteria for waste disposal or conversion?”

Dr. Han seemed to startle, as if he was actually looking at Alia for the first time. “Ideally conversion, but that may be a long way off.”

Theo laughed softly and said under his breath, “Do *not* test Alia Keralis, Girl Genius.”

Diana remembered what Nim had said: *The hard part is being seen.* She wasn’t sure what Theo saw when he looked at Alia, but he was certainly paying attention.

As Alia and Jason fell into conversation with Dr. Han, Diana heard Michael mutter to Theo, “Getting a quick start, I see.” He glanced at the two glasses in Theo’s hands.

Theo’s smile faltered, but he just said, “Aren’t you always telling me to apply myself?”

“What are you doing here? This is an important night.”

Theo downed the glass. “Jason wanted me here, so I’m here. Shocking, I know.”

“You will not embarrass us tonight,” Michael whispered furiously. “Not when so much is on the line.”

“Have you met Diana?” Theo said. “Diana, this is my father, Michael Santos. The savior of Keralis Labs. He’s quite the strategist, but not what I would call a lot of fun.”

Michael ignored him and offered Diana his hand. “A pleasure. Are you one of Alia’s friends from Bennett? She’s usually with that pudgy little Indian girl.”

“I’m not sure who you mean,” said Diana, feeling her anger prickle. “I’ve only met her friend Nim, the brilliant designer.”

Theo beamed and held up his remaining glass of champagne. “How about a sip to wash the taste of your foot from your mouth?”

“Just make yourself scarce,” hissed Michael.

“I would,” said Theo loudly, stepping past his father. “But I promised Alia a dance.”

Alia looked over. “You did?”

Theo snatched her hand and bowed theatrically. “You’re not going to change your mind, are you?” He dragged her after him to the dance floor. “My fragile heart couldn’t take it.”

With a nervous glance at Dr. Han, Michael laughed again. “Spirited boy. If he would just apply himself the way Jason does.”

But Diana wasn’t listening; her attention was focused on Alia vanishing through the crowd. Her gaze met Jason’s, and he held out his hand. “I’m so sorry, Dr. Han,” he said. “But I have the uncontrollable urge to dance.”

Diana’s brows shot up. Maybe not all mortals excelled at subterfuge.

She took Jason’s hand, and they wended through the partygoers to the dance floor. Diana allowed herself a small sigh of relief when she spotted Alia and Theo swaying together in the spangled light. Alia was laughing and seemed to be all right, but Diana didn’t intend to lose sight of her, no matter how many guards Jason had posted.

Jason led her onto the dance floor, sliding his hand beneath the golden fall of the lasso shawl as he drew her closer, his fingers brushing the bare skin of her back. She stiffened, then flushed when she realized he’d noticed.

“I have to touch you if we’re going to dance,” he said, sounding bemused.

“I know that,” Diana replied, bothered by the edge to her voice. “We don’t dance like this where I’m from.” Alia laughed again, and Theo spun her beneath his arm and into a dip. “Or like that, for that matter.”

It was comforting to focus on Alia and Theo instead of the scrap of distance between her body and Jason's. Why should standing so close to someone make her pulse jump? Was it simply because he was a male? *It's a novelty,* she told herself. Or maybe it was because, poised this way, her hand clasped in his, their bodies separated by a breath, felt almost like the moment before an embrace. Or a fight. Why couldn't they just wrestle again? That had been easier. And she would win.

Jason pressed his hand firmly to her back, and she nearly lost her footing.

"What are you doing?" she asked, more irritably than she'd meant to.

"I'm trying to lead."

"Why?" It was hard enough to manage these strange movements in new shoes and a borrowed dress without him jostling her around.

"Because that's the way it's done."

"That's a lazy answer."

He huffed a small, surprised laugh. "Maybe it is," he said. "This is how I learned. I guess I don't know how to do it any other way."

Diana felt something in her relax. "I like it when you're honest," she said, realizing the truth of the words as she spoke them.

"When I make my case like a human?" he said, a grin in his voice.

She let herself yield to the pressure of his hand, the tilt of his body—for now. Dancing might not be quite like fighting, but you still had to be careful when someone stepped into your guard.

"Better," he murmured. "Next time, you can lead."

What next time? she wanted to ask.

Alia's laugh floated over the crowd, and Jason swung Diana around gracefully, cutting through the other couples so they could keep Alia and Theo in view—they were laughing, breathless, hands clasped, spinning in a tipsy circle. Theo's style of dancing was definitely more theatrical than Jason's.

"I don't hear Alia laugh enough," Jason said.

"I suspect she'd say the same of you."

His shoulders lifted slightly in a shrug. "Maybe. She needs to meet more people, have more fun, but with the danger…"

"She's having fun now."

"Well, I don't want her having too much fun. Not with Theo."

Given the display with his father, Diana wasn't sure Theo was the best thing for Alia, either. Even so, it was hard not to think of what Theo had said about Jason not wanting him around. "I thought you were friends."

"We are. But Theo isn't exactly…steady. He falls in and out of love like a kid on a waterslide. Falls hard, hits bottom, wants to go again."

"His father seems to agree."

Jason winced. "I know. He's too rough on Theo, but I understand his frustration. Theo's brilliant. He can write code, hack pretty much any security system. He just seems to want to spend all of his time gaming."

"Is that so bad?"

“He could make a lot of money at it, if that’s what you mean.”

“It isn’t,” Diana said, annoyed.

“I just think he could do a lot of good, if he wanted to.” Jason lifted his arm, his other hand pressing at Diana’s back so she spun in a tight circle, the lights of the room whirling past. “But Theo doesn’t want to listen to me any more than Alia does.”

“No one likes to be told what to do. You’ve chosen a future. Alia deserves the same chance.”

“She isn’t ready. She trusts too easily. Case in point, you.”

This again. Jason’s wariness was understandable, but his assessment of his sister was so wrongheaded. She pulled back a little so that she could look at him. “Alia didn’t trust me because she’s naive. She leaned on me because she had to.”

“And now you’ve conveniently gained access to our home and a party full of some of the most powerful people in New York.”

“There is nothing convenient about this for me.”

Jason hissed in a breath and Diana realized she was clutching his hand like a vise as her anger rose. His hand gripped her waist, drawing her closer, his gaze fierce.

“What brought you here, Diana Prince? How do you fight the way you do? How did you identify my security team?”

Part of her wanted to pull away, but she refused to retreat. Instead, she leaned in, so close their mouths were almost touching. His eyes widened.

“Do you really think you’ll get the answers you want by trying to bully me?” she asked.

He swallowed, then seemed to regain his composure. “I tend to be very good at getting what I want.”

Diana’s chin lifted. “I think you’ve grown too used to people saying yes to you.”

“Have I?”

“But you have no idea how much I enjoy saying no.”

The corner of Jason’s mouth curled, his dimple flashing briefly, and Diana felt an unexpected surge of triumph.

“You think I’m a bully,” he said, shifting his weight with ease, using his momentum to guide her.

“Yes.”

“A jerk?” He took another smooth, sure-footed step, his thigh brushing hers as they glided through the crowd.

“Yes.”

“A budding tyrant?”

That seemed a bit extreme, but she nodded anyway.

Jason laughed. “You may be right.” He took advantage of her surprise to spin her. The lights of the room whirred around her, and she felt the swell of the music rise up through the floor as he drew her back into his orbit. “I know

what people think of me. I know I'm not fun the way Theo is or charming the way my parents were. None of this comes easy to me. But I also know I'm fighting for the right things."

She envied his certainty, the conviction in his voice.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"Because I know what it would mean to lose them. Alia wants me to let Michael do more of the work, enjoy myself. She doesn't understand how fast we can be on the outside of what our parents created, with no way back in."

Diana thought of her mother sitting at the table in the Iolanth Court, speaking to one Amazon after another, the long meetings and debates and dinners, Diana waiting, always waiting for a moment of her time. *I can never be seen to be shirking my duties,* she'd said. *To the Amazons, I must always be their queen first and your mother second.* Diana hadn't really understood, hadn't wanted to. *Can't Tek do it?* she'd asked. But Hippolyta had only shaken her head. *If Tek does the work, then the Amazons will begin to see her as their queen, and rightly so. It must be me, Diana. And one day, when I grow weary of this work and this crown, it will be you.*

"What?" said Jason. "I can see you want to say something, so spit it out."

Diana met his eyes. "When you ride, your mount learns the feel of the hands that hold the reins; it gets used to responding to those commands. There's danger in letting someone else take the reins for too long."

A troubled expression passed over Jason's face. "That's it exactly." He spun her again, and this time, when he drew her back to him, there was a hesitancy she hadn't sensed before.

"What is it?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at Alia. "Is something wrong?"

"She's fine," said Jason. "Everything's fine. It's just, you're the only…" The muscles of his shoulder bunched beneath her hand, and he gave an almost-irritated shrug. "Everyone always just tells me to relax."

Uptight. High-strung. Alia and Diana had both used those words to describe Jason. But maybe he was so focused because he couldn't afford not to be.

"Michael must understand," she ventured.

But Jason's frown deepened. "My parents trusted Michael implicitly. Sometimes I worry they trusted him too much." He cast her a guilty glance, and she realized how dangerous a dance could be. The music, the glow of the lights, this half embrace. It was too easy to speak secrets, to forget the world waiting beyond the last note of the song. "That isn't fair. He's done a lot for our family. Still…"

Diana looked over at Alia and Theo and saw him give her another wild spin. "Still?" she prompted.

"There were a lot of people with a lot to gain from my parents' death. Michael didn't buy into the conspiracy theories. He made sure there was a full investigation, and there was nothing suspicious. The roads were wet. My parents were arguing."

"But you think there's more to it."

"You don't understand." He took a long breath. "They'd been arguing more and more."

Despite the heat of the room, a chill settled over Diana's shoulders. "You think that Alia was the reason?"

"I don't know. If her power—"

"You seem immune to it," Diana protested. "Your friendship with Theo has thrived. You and Nim spar, but you seem genuinely fond of each other."

"But what if our mother and father weren't immune? What if…what if they weren't fighting because of problems at the lab or because they'd fallen out of love? What if…I don't know."

"Sure you do," Alia said. She was standing right next to them in her dress of gold scales, Theo beside her, his hand still at her waist. Her dark eyes were wide and startled, the pain in them a palpable thing. "You think I killed them."

"Alia, no, that isn't what I meant—"

"Then what *did* you mean, Jason?"

Diana hated herself for being so thoughtless, for losing herself in the questions Jason had posed.

"I—I only—" Jason stuttered. "I didn't—"

"That's what I thought."

Alia turned on her heel and fled through the crowd.

Theo shook his head, looking at Jason as if he were a stranger. "Why would you say something like that?"

"It's complicated," Jason bit out. "You wouldn't understand."

Theo flinched as if Jason had struck him.

"Probably not," he said with an attempt at a disinterested shrug.

"I need to go find her," Jason said. "She's not—"

"No," said Diana. "I'll go."

"I'm her brother—"

And I understand what it's like to feel like your crime is just existing. Diana turned and hurried through the crowd before Jason could finish.

"Alia!" she called, wending through the partygoers.

Alia stumbled but kept moving. When she reached an empty corner near the back of the room, she leaned against the wall and shucked off her shoes, collecting them in one hand. With the other, she batted at the tears that had begun to fall.

Diana thought of Alia emerging from the bathroom in her golden mail, shoulders back, head held like a queen, and felt that something lovely had been lost.

She approached slowly, afraid Alia might take off running again. She said nothing as she took up a place against the wall beside her, and for a long while, they stood in silence, looking out at the partygoers, hidden by shadows broken by slices of colored light. She hesitated, unsure of where to start, but Alia spoke first.

“Why didn’t they send me away?” she said, a flood of fresh tears coursing over her cheeks. “If my parents knew what I was, why didn’t they send me somewhere I couldn’t hurt them?”

This at least was a place to begin. “You don’t know that you caused the accident.”

“Jason thinks I did.”

“Jason was just talking, trying to ease his own mind. He doesn’t blame you. He loves you.”

“How could he *not* blame me?” A sob caught in her throat. “I blame me.”

Diana struggled for words that might soothe her, and the only ones she found were those she’d whispered to herself when the island had felt too small, when Tek’s barbs had felt too sharp. “We can’t help the way we’re born. We can’t help what we are, only what life we choose to make for ourselves.”

Alia gave an angry shake of her head. “Tell me some part of you doesn’t wish you had never saved me,” she said. “You and I both know I should have died in that shipwreck.”

Hadn’t the Oracle said much the same thing? Diana had almost believed it then, but she refused to believe it now. “If you’d drowned that day, if you died now, it would only be a question of time until a new Warbringer was born. If we reach the spring—”

“So what if we reach the spring?” Alia said furiously, then lowered her voice as a woman in a black taffeta gown cast her a curious glance. She pushed off the wall and turned to Diana, dark eyes blazing. “So what if it fixes me or purges me or whatever? It won’t bring Dr. Ellis or Jasmine or the crew of the *Thetis* back. It won’t bring my mom and dad back.”

Diana took a breath and placed her hands on Alia’s shoulders, desperate to make her understand. “My whole life…my whole life people have been wondering if I had a right to be. Maybe I don’t. Maybe neither of us should exist, but we’re here now. We have this chance, and maybe that isn’t a coincidence. Maybe we’re the ones who were meant to break this cycle. Together.” Alia held her gaze, and Diana hoped her words were reaching her. “Your parents thought there might be a way to turn your power, the legacy of the Warbringer’s blood, to something good. By going to the spring, you’re fulfilling that promise in a different way.”

Alia pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes as if trying to shove back her tears. “Diana, swear to me that if we don’t make it, that if something happens, you’ll end this. I can’t be the reason the world goes to hell.”

Diana dropped her hands. *I’m going to need you to kill me*. She’d hoped those words had been spoken in haste, that they were the result of shock and Alia would abandon such thoughts. “I can’t do that. I…I won’t commit murder.”

“You pulled me from the wreck,” Alia said, her voice hard with resolve. “You took me off that island. You can’t ask me to live with all the rest.”

A sick sensation settled in Diana’s gut. Making this vow would mean turning her back on everything she’d been taught to believe. That life was sacred. That when it seemed violence was the only choice, there was always

another. But Alia needed strength to continue, and maybe this grim excuse for hope was the only way to give her that.

"Then we make a pact," Diana said, though the words felt wrong in her mouth. "You agree to fight with everything you have to make it to that spring."

"All right. And if it isn't enough?"

Diana took a deep breath. "Then I will spare the world and take your life. But I want your word."

"You've got it."

"No, not a mortal vow. I want the oath of an Amazon."

Alia's eyes widened. "A what?"

"Those are my people. Women born of war, destined to be ruled by no one but themselves. We make this pact with their words. Agreed?" Alia nodded, and Diana placed her fist over her heart. "Sister in battle, I am shield and blade to you. As I breathe, your enemies will know no sanctuary. While I live, your cause is mine."

Alia placed her own hand over her heart and repeated the words, and as she did, Diana felt the power of the oath surround them, binding them together. It was a vow Diana had shared with no one else, one that might make her a killer. But she did not let her gaze falter.

"All right," said Alia on a shuddering breath. "Let's find Jason and get the hell out of here."

That was when the air tore open around them. A loud, staccato clamor filled Diana's ears. She knew that sound; she recognized it from the vision she'd glimpsed in the Oracle's waters. Gunfire.

Diana covered Alia's body with her own, hurling them both to the ground as the ugly cacophony of gunshots filled the gallery, battering her senses. It was so much *louder* than in the vision.

"Alia—" she began, but her words were smothered by a thunderous *boom*.

The vast wall of windows shattered, dropping to the floor in a cascade of glass.

Diana kept Alia's body shielded, jagged bits of glass peppering her back and shoulders like wasp stings as people cried out around them.

Men in black body armor were rappelling in through the huge hole where the windows had been. They dropped to the floor near the reflecting pool as party guests scattered, screaming and racing for the doors, gunshots echoing through the room.

Diana dragged Alia behind the shelter of a table. "We have to get out of here."

"The others—" protested Alia.

The men were advancing from the opposite side of the gallery, tossing guests out of the way as they shone lights in the faces of the bodies that had fallen, examining their features.

They were clearly looking for someone—someone they didn't intend to take alive—and Diana knew she and Alia didn't have long.

She could smell the fear-tinged sweat of the partygoers, feel her heart racing in her chest, as if she'd woken suddenly from sleep. She tugged at the knots in the shawl Nim had made of her lasso. There wasn't time to untangle them all. The one weapon she had was useless.

"We can't just stay pinned down here," Diana said, shrugging off the knotted rope and tying it around her waist to keep it from constricting her movements. "We have to make a break for the doors."

"I don't see the others," Alia said, peering around the table. "We can't leave without them."

Though Diana's heart was pounding, her thoughts were clear as she adopted and discarded strategies, her mind turning over the layout of the room, calculating the positions of their assailants. The other guests were trying to crowd through the room's two doorways, shoving and pushing at one another in their panic, but she suspected the soldiers would have already barricaded the hallways and would move to seal the doors. Any time someone tried to escape through the shattered glass wall, a bullet struck them down. Diana scanned the shadows of the wide balcony above the reflecting pool where she knew snipers must be lurking.

A bullet struck the slate floor beside the table, sending up a puff of pulverized stone. Diana wondered what a gunshot might do to her, but there was no time to worry about it. She had to get Alia to safety.

"Diana!" The shout came from the other side of the temple, barely audible in the chaos. Jason and Theo were crouched behind another table. She met

Jason's eyes and gestured toward the rear of the temple. It was the one spot in the room that provided a defensible position with any kind of real cover. If Diana could get Alia there, she would have time to locate Nim and maybe figure out an escape plan.

"I'll find Nim," she said. "But we need to get you behind that temple. We can't just sit here and wait for them to flank us."

"Okay," Alia said, "okay." But Diana wasn't sure how much of what she was saying was getting through. Alia was breathing hard, her eyes wide, her pupils dilated.

"When I count three, I want you to roll right and get behind the next table, understand? That's how we're going to do it. I count three, you move, no time for hesitation. We're going to get you to Jason and Theo."

"Promise me you'll find Nim."

"Your cause is mine," said Diana.

Alia blinked as if her terror had driven the meaning of the vow from her mind. "All right," she said, then clutched Diana's wrist. "Be careful."

Diana felt a grim smile on her lips. She was afraid, but swelling against that fear was a tide of exhilaration. Her fight with Jason in the hotel hallway had been a tussle. This was a battle. Suddenly, she didn't feel like being careful at all. Was this what it meant to be an Amazon? A sword's edge went dull if left unused too long. She was ready to hone her blade.

"On three." She slid into a crouch. "One." She braced her hands against the table's legs. "Two." She nodded to Alia. "Three!"

She waited only long enough to see Alia drop and roll, then flipped the table on its side in a clatter of dishes. Gunfire rattled off its surface. She ripped the metal legs from the table, seized it by its edges, and hurled it with all her might.

It spun through the air like a huge discus and crashed into the phalanx of soldiers, but she didn't stop to watch them topple. She leapt behind the next table, slamming gracelessly into Alia as a spate of bullets followed her.

"Again!" she yelled.

Alia rolled and Diana tossed the table, diving to the ground as gunfire chased her tumbling form. She hissed as a bullet grazed her shoulder—more like a burn than a sword slice.

Diana heard boots thundering over the ground. "They're coming around. Keep moving!" she commanded Alia.

But it was too late—a soldier had flanked them on their left. She saw him raise his gun, fire. She threw her body in front of Alia's and felt the bullets strike her arm, her side. Pain like she'd never known hammered at her body in sharp, reverberating jabs, each gunshot a fist of fire that drove the breath from her lungs. She heard a loud *ping* as a bullet struck the bracelet on her arm and looked down. It hadn't even made a dent. But the ricochet…

"Are you hit?" Alia gasped from beneath her. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she said. But that wasn't quite true. Though she wasn't bleeding, her skin was covered in red welts, and her body ached as if she'd

taken the worst beating of her life. Maybe bullets would have glanced off an Amazon at the height of her strength. Diana just knew she didn't want to get shot again.

With a click, the soldier on their left slammed home a second clip and readied to fire again. A shot sounded and a circular black wound appeared on the soldier's thigh. He screamed and crumpled to the ground, clutching his leg.

Jason peeked out from behind the temple, the gun from his ankle holster in hand, and gave her the briefest nod.

"Alia, I need you to run for the temple. Get to Jason. I'll cover you."

"How?" Alia cried. "You don't have a weapon."

I am *the weapon,* she thought. "Just go."

"I'm not going to leave you to be slaughtered."

"Alia, now!"

Alia ran. This time when Diana threw the table, she stood her ground. *This is madness,* railed a voice in her head, but by then ten soldiers were opening fire.

She didn't stop to think, just let herself react. Time seemed to slow as the air came alive in a hail of bullets. This was like no sparring match or staged skirmish, and some part of her knew it. Her muscles responded with effortless speed, instinct guiding her movements. She forgot her pain as she barreled toward the line of men facing her down, deflecting their gunfire as she ran. The bullets made silver streaks in her vision, strange music as they clanged against her bracelets, their impact like the hard patter of rain on a metal roof.

She rolled into a somersault, came up, glimpsed sparks glinting from her wrists as another shower of bullets flew. She could hear triggers being pulled, the jangle of the metal casings hitting the floor, smell an acrid heat that she knew was gunpowder.

"What the hell?" she heard someone cry as she crashed into the row of men, breaking their ranks, sending them flying into the remaining tables. She felt hands seize her as the soldiers who hadn't been knocked down fell upon her in a wave, trying to wrestle her to the ground. They were kindling in her hands, insubstantial. She threw them off, and one struck the temple's gate hard enough to buckle the stone pillar.

Is this all you are? something inside her demanded. *Cowards clutching your guns? Give me a challenge.*

Diana heard a high, whining sound, like the rising shriek of a firework. From across the reflecting pool, another man was aiming something at her. It was far larger than the other weapons, its barrel terminating in a wide, ugly mouth.

"Diana, get down!" screamed a voice.

Nim. She was on the floor where the musicians had been gathered, their instruments now abandoned. Her face was tearstained, the heavy kohl that lined her eyes trickling down her cheeks, and Diana saw a pretty blonde in an elaborate gown lying motionless beside her.

Panic flooded Diana's body as that high whine reached a crescendo. Her muscles itched to dive, evade, run. Instead, she listened to the fighting instinct that had been trained into her over countless hours in the Armory, that had flowed into her with her mother's blood and the blessing of the gods—the warrior's call that refused to let her flinch. If she didn't have a shield, she would make one.

The floor was set with huge slate tiles. She flattened her palms and drove her fingers into the narrow space between two of them, ignoring the pain, and yanked the slab upward.

The man with the big gun fired. Diana glimpsed a flash of glowing blue light and a wall of pressure slammed into her, knocking her off her feet and hurling her backward, the slab blown to dust in her hands. She struck the wall, breath releasing in a grunt, and slid to the floor. Then she was back on her feet, shaking off the force of the impact. What *was* that thing?

Diana heard that electrical whine begin again as the weapon repowered—but this time the soldier was aiming toward the temple. Her mind registered Jason trying to herd partygoers to shelter, her ears plucking the steady command of his voice from the chaos. She couldn't see Alia, but she had to be behind the temple with Theo.

Diana knew she wouldn't reach the gunman in time to stop him from firing. She looked down at the tiles fitted together on the floor. She needed reinforcements. Maybe they could be her army. She took a running leap toward the soldier and came down hard, foot and fist connecting with the ground at the same time. The tiles lifted in a rippling wave, and the man with the pulse gun screamed as the floor heaved beneath his feet. He toppled.

Diana sprang toward him, seized the weapon from his arms, and snapped it in two. He skittered backward in a crouch, his eyes wide and terrified.

He drew his sidearm and fired, but her mind had registered his intention in the shift of his shoulders. Her wrists were already moving to deflect the bullets, bracelets clanging like finger cymbals in some bloody dance. One of the bullets pinged off her right wrist and struck his thigh. He yelped. She grabbed him by his collar.

"What are you?" he gasped.

A hundred answers came to mind, but she opted for the easiest one. "A tourist."

She tossed him into the reflecting pool.

Diana wrenched two more slate slabs from the edge of the pool, stepped back, and hurled them at the snipers on the balcony. It was a bit like trying to knock down ceramic targets with her Amazon sisters. Except these targets grunted or whimpered instead of exploding into pieces.

The other soldiers around her were recovering, getting to their feet. Diana raced toward Nim and grabbed her under one arm.

Nim squeaked but thankfully didn't fight her. Diana wasn't sure how much she'd seen, how much any of them had seen of what she could do—what she hadn't even known she could do—but she couldn't think about that now.

Again, she heard weapons being cocked. This time she was ready for the gunfire that would follow. She dove to the floor, protecting Nim's body from the fall, and rolled until they were at the back of the temple. Alia grabbed hold of Nim and hugged her tight as they both sobbed and another round of gunfire erupted through the air.

"You made it," said Jason on a grateful gasp. He squeezed out a couple of shots from behind the additional cover he'd constructed from a stack of tables, and Diana saw that he'd managed to get a fair number of guests behind the temple. Some were still crowded against the room's exits, trying to push through the doors, but at least snipers were no longer picking them off.

Diana and the others crouched in a knot against the temple wall. They didn't have much time. She could see the fear in their faces as Alia held tight to Nim and Theo. Jason's eyes were bright, his jaw clenched. Only he looked ready for a fight.

"They're going to blow the temple," Diana said as loudly as she dared over the roar of gunfire.

"The helicopter—" Alia began.

Jason shook his head. "It was on the roof." The men had rappelled down from above. The roof must be compromised.

The gunfire stopped.

In the eerie silence, Diana could hear the soldiers' murmurs and shouts. They were speaking a language different from Alia and Jason's, but Diana understood it. *German,* she realized, and they kept repeating the same word: *Entzünderin*. Igniter. They might have been talking about the bombs, but Diana had a feeling they were referring to Alia.

"They're setting explosives," she said.

Nim's eyes were dazed. "They're going to blow up the museum?"

Theo gave his head a sharp shake. "What is all this? What do they want?"

"We'll explain when we're out of here," said Jason.

"*If* we get out of here," said Alia. "There's no helicopter—"

Jason's brow furrowed. "What if I can get the jet here?"

"Where would it land?" said Theo. "You can't put that on the roof. We need a runway."

"The Great Lawn," offered Nim.

"It's a long sprint to the park," said Alia.

Jason bobbed his chin toward the blocked doors. "First we have to get out of this room."

"You'll get out," said Diana. "I'll make sure you do."

Jason jabbed at his phone and spoke rapidly into it.

Diana had no idea how feasible a landing was, but she had to believe there was a way out of this, not just for Alia but for the people who had put on their best finery and come here to drink and dance tonight. She could sense their mortal lives flickering, fleeting as the shine of fireflies under glass.

"Ben's coming," said Jason. "We need to get to the park."

Thank all the gods. They had a chance. But the only way out was the wall of shattered windows to their left, and it was far too exposed. Diana couldn't be a shield for everyone, and all it would take was a single stray bullet, the right moment, the right angle. She couldn't let that happen. They needed cover. A lot of it. She touched her hand to the temple stone and wondered if she was strong enough to do what she was imagining.

"I can give you enough cover to make a break for the glass wall. I'll meet you below."

Alia gripped her arm, her eyes bright with fear. "You're not coming?"

"They're barricading the rest of the guests in. I won't leave innocent people here to die."

"Diana—"

"Stay with Jason; he'll keep you safe."

"They're too well armed," said Theo. "You won't make it."

"Stay low. When I give the signal, you bolt for the closest corner of the window wall."

"How will we know—" Alia said.

"Trust me, you'll know. This temple is coming down, and you need to be on the other side of it when it does."

Jason offered her his gun. "At least take this."

She lifted a brow. She was not afraid of these men, only of the harm they might do others, and she would not resort to playing with their ugly toys. "I'm going to choose to ignore this insult, Jason Keralis. Now *go*."

As soon as they were moving, Diana wedged her shoulder against the wall of the temple. She thrust her weight against the ancient stones, her battered muscles straining, feeling every aching spot where a bullet had struck. She dug her feet into the slate floor, reaching for strength that seemed just out of her grasp. What if she'd reached the limits of her might and she couldn't protect them? *No*. She refused that thought. She sucked in a breath and doubled her effort, grunting with the strain, the threads of her dress popping.

"I am never wearing anything without straps again," she growled.

Something in the temple creaked. Diana whispered a quick prayer to the goddesses, begging that they would seek Isis's forgiveness on her behalf, and *pushed*. The stone beneath her palms shuddered.

"Now!" she shouted.

The temple collapsed with a thunderous roar, sending a huge plume of dust into the air. She drove her legs forward, and the wide heap of stone groaned as it slid into place, blocking off the northwest corner of the window wall—the perfect barricade to keep the soldiers at bay as Alia and the others escaped.

But now the party guests were shouting and running, crowding up against the sealed doorways. She needed a battering ram. Her eyes lit on one of the fallen pillars of the temple. It was huge and unevenly weighted, the stone rough beneath her palms, but she managed to balance the column in her arms.

She didn't know what the soldiers had erected to keep the exit doors shut, but she was going through.

"Move or be crushed!" she commanded as she launched herself toward the exit, surprised by the authority that rang through her voice. *Well,* she thought, *all those years listening to Tek give orders ought to be good for something*.

It seemed to work because the crowd scrambled to get clear.

She tightened her grip and drove the pillar into the doors. They gave way with a terrible crash, scattering the wall of sandbags the men had erected behind them. Diana's momentum carried her into the hallway, past stunned men in body armor. She released the pillar, and it slammed into the wall.

Partygoers poured toward the confused soldiers as Diana tried to fight the tide back to the temple room. One of the men stepped into her path, gun raised.

"Who do you fight for?" he demanded. His hair was so blond it was nearly white and cropped close to his head. She grabbed him by the throat and the wrist and shoved him against the wall, knocking the weapon from his hands.

"Get out of my way."

She strode past him, but he seized her arm. "Our cause is just," he said pleadingly. "Stop her. The Warbringer must die before the reaping moon. You cannot know the horrors that will be unleashed."

"She's a girl, and she deserves a chance," Diana said, and wondered if she was pleading her own case, too.

"Not at this price."

"Who are you to make such a calculation?"

"Who are *you*?" said the soldier.

Diana gazed into his determined blue eyes. He was right. She was gambling with the future of the world. Under other circumstances, they might have been allies.

"Whoever your leader is," she said, "tell him there's another way. There's a cure, and we're going to find it."

"You're mad," he said. "The Warbringer must be stopped."

Maybe she was, but her choice was made. Diana slammed the soldier back against the wall. "Then try and stop us."

She ran past him, racing toward the window wall. She heard him shout, "Blow it! If we can't get the Warbringer, we can get her bodyguard."

From somewhere, she heard a tiny click, a button pressed, a fuse catching. She vaulted over the ruins of the temple, launching herself through the window wall. From behind her she heard an earsplitting explosion and felt a wave of heat at her back. It thrust her forward through the air. Her arms pinwheeled at her sides as the force of the bomb carried her too far too fast.

Alia's lungs burned as she stumbled across East Drive, dodging the Saturday-night traffic, the screech of brakes and blaring car horns registering in rapid flashes as panic careened through her. She was aware of Nim's hand in hers, of the painful slap of her soles against the pavement. Then they were on the other side of the road and tumbling into the park. She tripped and fell as her feet struck the softness of green grass.

A *boom* sounded behind them, and Alia turned to see a cloud of flame blooming like an angry flower from the museum's flank before the petals curled in on themselves and the explosion receded.

Diana.

Nim was pulling on her arm. Jason was shouting. She told her feet to move, but she couldn't stop staring at the flaming wreck of the room where they'd just been, still lit by the museum's outdoor floodlights, as if no one had yet realized what was happening. But already she could hear sirens, see people pulling over to the side of the road. Where was Diana? If she'd made it out, she should be trailing after them, she should be crossing the road right now. But she wasn't. Maybe she hadn't made it. Maybe she was lying broken in the ruins of the temple. Maybe she'd been captured.

"Alia, we have to move. *Now*." Jason seized her wrist and pulled her after them.

Alia cast a last look over her shoulder, and then they were charging through the trees, crashing toward the baseball diamonds. Jason was yelling into his cell phone as the Great Lawn came into view.

Alia heard a teeth-rattling shriek, and Jason threw his arms out. "Stop!"

"Holy crap," said Nim as a jet roared overhead, impossibly close, wheels brushing the tops of the trees.

They put up their hands as the wind battered them with a hail of dust and tiny pebbles. The jet touched down on the wide, empty expanse of the Great Lawn, sending up a fountain of dirt in its wake as the wheels tore into the earth and the plane bobbled wildly.

"Is there enough room?" Theo asked.

"The Great Lawn is fifty-five acres," Nim said.

"More trivia?" he yelled. "I just want to know if he has enough runway."

"This isn't my kind of runway," retorted Nim, but her voice was wobbly.

The little plane slowed, nearing the tree line.

"He's not going to make it," Jason said.

Alia clapped her hands over her mouth.

But the plane skidded to a halt mere feet from the trees.

Theo whooped as the jet turned in a slow, tight circle.

"Come on," said Jason.

As they bolted across the lawn, Alia cast another look back toward the trees, but the park was silent and dark.

The jet was painted blue and gold, the Keralis Labs logo—a golden *K* bracketed by laurel leaves—emblazoned on the side. Alia had been on it a few times before. As they drew closer, she could see the deep furrows the jet had left in the lawn.

The door on the side of the jet opened, and the stairs descended. A burly man with coppery hair leaned out and raised a hand in greeting.

"I guess the lines are better here than at JFK?" he said. Ben Barrows. He'd been flying with the family a long time. Alia remembered he was former military.

Jason herded them up the stairs and inside. "How did you do it, Ben?"

"Talent, grit, and a shit ton of luck," he said. "Sorry, kids."

"We were just shot at," said Theo, slumping onto one of the banquettes in the lounge area at the front of the plane. "I think our tender ears will survive."

"I'm gonna need you to get into a proper seat and buckle up for takeoff. All of you."

"Can you get us off the ground?" asked Jason.

"Yeah, but getting back on it is going to be trickier. We sustained some damage to the landing gear."

"How much trickier?"

"I can handle it. But we need to get out of here or we're going to have NORAD up our asses. I told Teterboro I needed to make an emergency landing, but they're going to notice I didn't reach LaGuardia. We don't get airborne pronto, we're not going to make it off the coast."

"Everyone, buckle up," Jason ordered. "Ben, get us in the air."

The others obeyed, strapping themselves into the row of seats facing the lounge.

Ben reached for the handle beside the door, but Alia grabbed his arm.

"Don't," she said. "We can't just leave her, Jason."

Ben hesitated, eyes moving from Alia to her brother.

Jason pointed at one of the empty seats. "Alia, get your ass in a seat. You saw that explosion—"

"We're not leaving without her."

"Ben," said Jason. "Do it."

Alia moved to block Ben, but Jason took her by the shoulders, forcing her away from the door and into a seat. Ben yanked the handle down, and the door began to close.

Jason's grip was like steel. *"Alia,"* he said angrily. "Diana was trying to protect you. We're all trying to protect you. We need to get out of here now or none of us is making it to the other side of this night."

The plane lurched forward, and Alia realized Ben was back in the cockpit.

A burst of gunfire sounded from outside.

"Um, guys?" said Nim.

Alia shoved against Jason, and when he didn't budge she turned and bit his hand. Hard.

He yelped, and she pushed away from him, scrambling past Theo and Nim to look through Nim's window, nearly falling against it as the plane rumbled over the uneven terrain, picking up speed.

Diana was racing across the Great Lawn, blue dress in shreds, dark hair streaming behind her. A group of soldiers exploded from the woods, close on her heels.

"Jason, she's coming!" Alia shouted.

Jason grabbed her arm again, trying to pull her back as the plane picked up speed and Theo and Nim braced themselves against their seats. "Those men are coming after *you,* Alia. To kill you."

Your cause is mine.

A voice crackled over the radio. "Learjet N-535T, we have emergency vehicles en route to crash site. Please report your status."

"Ben, if you take off, you're fired!" Alia yelled.

"She can't fire you!" Jason retorted.

"He signs the checks," Ben called over his shoulder.

"Alia, we have to go!" said Jason.

"Diana!" Alia shouted pointlessly, face pressed to the window.

As if she had heard her, Diana put on a burst of speed.

"Damn," said Theo. "That girl can run."

She almost seemed to be flying, her strides long. Alia could see that the fabric of her gown was singed, and there were welts on her skin, but she seemed whole and unharmed.

Alia braced her hand against the side of the jet and faced Jason.

"Open the door," she demanded.

"We can't stop, Alia. There's not enough runway."

The jet jounced along, faster and faster.

"We need her help to get to the spring!" she insisted.

And she saw it then. The doubt that flickered over his face. Jason had agreed to go to the spring because he'd wanted to give her hope, but he'd never really believed.

"Jason, if you don't open that door, I will find a way to end my life before the new moon. I swear it on our parents' lives."

The words struck him like a slap. Alia almost regretted them, but if that was what it took to make him listen…

"Damn it," Jason swore. He strode to the door and yanked down on the handle. Immediately, an alarm began to sound.

Ben's voice crackled over the radio. "Don't know what you're doing back there, but this is your captain speaking, and he'd like you to cut it the hell out."

"Diana!" Alia screamed again. The door opened wider, spreading like a clamshell, the night air rushing through. Alia could see the brightly lit baseball diamonds and Diana hurtling toward the jet.

She shouted something, but Alia wasn't sure what. She was waving her arms frantically.

“Something’s wrong,” Alia cried, then realized it was a ridiculous understatement.

“No, you idiot,” said Theo. “She’s saying get out of the way.”

Theo shoved up from his seat and yanked her away from the door just as Diana took two huge strides and *leapt,* launching herself through the air like a missile. She dove through the door of the plane, tucking into a somersault and slamming hard against the banquette. Gunfire pelted the side of the jet.

Jason jammed the handle up, and the door started sliding back into place as Alia’s stomach lurched and the jet lifted off. She stumbled backward into Theo, nearly falling into his lap.

Jason threw her into a seat, hurling himself down beside her, and then they were in the air, climbing.

Alia heard a horrible crunching sound as the plane jolted and shook. *The wheels,* she realized. They’d scraped the tops of the trees. She dared to look down through the window as the plane arced over the park. Craning her neck, she could just make out the baseball diamonds, the men standing on the ruin that had been the Great Lawn.

She blinked, trying to clear her vision. For just a moment she’d thought — But that was impossible. Had she hit her head again? Were the fear and adrenaline playing tricks on her? She thought she’d seen what looked like a chariot drawn by four massive black horses cutting across the field toward the soldiers, floodlights glinting off the driver’s plumed helmet. Alia gave herself a shake. She needed a good night’s sleep. She needed a *month* of good night’s sleep.

“Learjet N-535T, you are not cleared for takeoff,” said the voice over the radio. “Report your status.”

The crackle of static died as Ben switched off the radio. “My status is most likely looking at a career change,” he said. “Everyone okay back there?”

“You tell me, Ben,” said Jason.

“We’re in a wait-and-see situation. If we triggered a scramble out of Barnes, we’re going to know pretty quick when they shoot us down.”

Alia swallowed hard. She peered through the window as the city lights gave way to the vast, unending black of the Atlantic. Would she see death coming? She tried to breathe, to leash her heart rate. Silence enveloped the cabin, the only sound the thrum of the jet’s engines as they all waited, wondering what might be headed toward them in the dark.

Beside her, she saw that Jason had somehow managed to split his lip during the fight, and the sleeve of his jacket had become almost completely detached. Across the aisle, Theo had his head tipped back and his eyes shut. Alia didn’t know if he was praying or if he’d actually fallen asleep. Past him, Alia could see Nim staring straight ahead. Her eyes were ringed with mascara, and there was blood on her jumpsuit; her chest rose and fell in rapid, panicked hitches. Alia wished she could put her arm around her, tell her it would be all right. But that was a lie. Nothing was all right. Maybe nothing would ever be right again.

Diana had pulled herself onto the cream-colored banquette and sat rigidly in place, fingers digging into the cushions. Alia realized she'd probably never been on a plane before. Her dress had been reduced to what looked like a bedraggled ice-skating costume. The fabric was charred black near its edges —all but the lasso in a tangle at her waist, still as pristine as it had been when they left for the party. Her skin was pink in places.

Where the bullets struck, Alia realized. The wounds had already healed.

Alia had known Diana was strong, that there was some kind of magic at work on her island, but this was different. She'd thrown tables like Frisbees. She'd leapt into a moving plane. She'd survived an explosion and a gunfight with little more than a few bumps and scratches.

Theo shook his head and laughed, the sound strange in the quiet cabin. "Damn, Jason. You really know how to throw a party."

Nim buried her face in her hands. Jason was watching Diana.

"What is she?" he muttered beneath his breath, low enough that only Alia could hear.

Amazon. Born of war, destined to be ruled by no one but herself. But that wasn't Alia's secret to tell.

"I don't really know," Alia said. "I'm just glad she's on our side."

They sat in silence until Ben's voice came over the speaker. "You are now free to move about the cabin, fellow lawbreakers. We are clear."

Alia released a shuddering sigh of relief, and Jason gave her hand a squeeze.

Theo unbuckled his seat belt and stumbled over to the jet's bar by the banquettes. There was no turbulence, but Alia couldn't blame him for being unsteady on his feet.

"You're going to start drinking already?" said Nim, her tear-stained face bleak.

"No," said Theo. "I'm going to *continue* drinking."

"Theo," Jason said warningly.

"Would everyone relax?" he said. "I just want some ginger ale. My tummy gets upset when I fly, and almost dying doesn't help, either."

Alia wanted to laugh, but she was afraid she might just start crying. She felt shaken and exhausted now that the adrenaline was leaving her body, but she also felt grateful. Theo was alive. Nim was alive. Once again, Alia had evaded death. They'd all made it out. Maybe Diana was right and they *were* destined to survive and reach the spring.

Alia knew they needed to talk, but she wanted a chance to gather her thoughts and get cleaned up. The jet was equipped with a shower, so she retrieved her small travel case from where it had been stashed beside Diana's pack in the rear of the plane and headed into the bathroom to shed her golden scales.

The water was hot enough, but she didn't linger beneath it. She stepped out of the shower and stared at herself in the mirror. Her body was covered in new cuts and scrapes, and she knew she was going to have more bruises from all the tumbling and falling she'd done during the fight. She had blisters on her toes from those ridiculous shoes Nim had picked out.

She looked at the heap of finery and again felt the events of the night, of the last few days, threatening to overwhelm her, but she pushed that panic away. In a day, this would all be over.

Alia pulled on the jeans she'd packed and a ratty old T-shirt with a double helix on it that she'd gotten at science camp years ago. She frowned at her reflection as a memory came back to her: a brawl that had erupted at the closing picnic that year. She and the other kids had thought it was hilarious. They'd called it the Great Nerd Battle. But when the fight had been broken up and some semblance of calm had returned, Alia had heard two of the counselors talking. A boy had almost been choked to death by one of the staff, and a fire had been set in the dining hall. They were just lucky it hadn't spread. The camp had closed permanently after that.

At the time, it had just been something shocking for the campers to talk about, a story Alia brought home to her parents and Jason. But now she remembered her parents' expressions when she'd told them about the fight,

the look they'd exchanged. From then on, they spent their summers traveling or at one of the family's houses. There were no more trips to camp.

Alia wasn't sure what to do with the wreck she'd made of her beautiful dress, so she crushed it into a ball and shoved it to the bottom of her bag. No doubt Nim would be appalled, but she couldn't bear to look at it. Thinking of how happy and hopeful she'd felt when she'd put that dress on, of how she'd imagined Theo looking at her in it, made her skin prickle with embarrassment. It seemed silly now, and dangerous, too. Diana had been right: The people pursuing her were relentless. They clearly had resources they were willing to use—on innocent people on a boat in the Aegean, and now in full view of some of the wealthiest members of New York society.

Alia untangled the pretty gold chain from her braids, pulled on her sneakers, and took a last look in the mirror. Warbringer. Had Helen's legacy passed through her father's bloodline? Through the Keralis name to Alia? It didn't matter. She was her mother's daughter, too. She'd thought it had taken all of her courage to leave New York and sign up for the trip aboard the *Thetis*

Diana longed to wash the battle from her skin. The smell of smoke was in her hair, caught in the remnants of her gown. With every breath she was pulled back to the chaos of the attack, the terrifying sight of bodies on the ground, the echoes of the war cry that continued to reverberate in her blood.

Even though she still wasn't used to the feeling of being airborne, she forced herself to leave the reassuring solidity of the cushioned banquette and make her way back to the showers. She washed and changed into the leathers she'd stowed in her pack, looping the lasso at her hip. Diana would be conspicuous on the ground in Greece, but they'd be traveling quickly, and she felt more herself in Amazon clothing. If they faced another attack, she wanted any advantage she could get.

For a while she read through the files Jason had brought, keeping her back to the jet's window. She didn't like looking out into the dark and seeing her own face reflected back at her. She didn't want to think about the fact that she was hurtling through the air in a machine that mortals had constructed from metal and plastic and what seemed to be an unwarranted optimism in their own innovation. If she'd been the one at the controls it might have been different, but she did not like being in someone else's hands, no matter how reassuring Ben's manner and military experience might be.

Eventually her eyes grew heavy. Tucked into the plush seat, lulled by the sound of the engines, she managed to sleep. She dreamed that she was back on the battlefield that she'd seen in the Oracle's waters. She heard what she now knew was gunfire, saw the blackened ruins of an unknown city around her, the piles of bodies. But this time it was Tek who looked on as the jackal-headed beast tore out Diana's throat.

Diana woke gasping, hand clutched to her neck, still feeling the monster's long teeth lodged in her flesh.

The jet's cabin was silent. How much time had passed while she slept? Light gleamed from beneath the drawn window shades, and Diana realized they'd caught up to the sun.

Alia was curled next to Nim on the banquette, Theo across from them. Jason was in the back of the plane. When the girls had fallen asleep, Diana had seen Theo pour himself a drink that wasn't ginger ale. She said nothing, but she wondered if his behavior was out of habit or fatigue or something darker. Did he suspect his father's involvement in the attack? Could he be responsible himself? She didn't want to believe the worst of someone Jason and Alia cared about, and Theo's surprise and confusion about Alia's identity as the Warbringer had seemed genuine. But Diana didn't trust her instincts when it came to mortals and their deceptions. She felt like she was wandering in the dark through this world, catching only flashes of understanding, grasping one thing, then stumbling on to the next.

Alia's eyes moved beneath her lids, and Diana wondered if she should wake her. The dream she was having did not look pleasant. Her brow was furrowed, and she clutched one of the file folders in her arms.

Project Second Born. That had been the name Alia's parents had given to their research using Alia's blood. The majority of their information came from documents and artifacts passed down through the Keralis line, family legends, and the work of private investigators they'd hired to pursue leads on Helen's other descendants. There were photographs of archaeological sites, of private digs they'd funded at the locations of ancient battlegrounds, diving expeditions that ranged off the coast of Egypt to the depths of the Black Sea. They'd set up what seemed to be a secret division of Keralis Labs devoted to archaeogenetics, and though they'd begun their research looking for an answer to the problem of the Warbringer line, it was clear their minds had been engaged by the possibilities of what might be gleaned not only from Alia's biology but from the DNA—or aDNA—of the heroes and monsters they had come to accept might be more than legend.

Diana had flipped through page after page on the laptop's screen. It had taken some getting used to, and her fingers still hungered for the feel of paper, but her mind was greedy for the information that flowed before her. One after another, the images slid by, covered in annotations—Achilles with his famous shield in hand, Hector gifting his sword to Ajax. Aeneas. Odysseus. Helen's brothers, the legendary Dioskouroi. But there were other images, illustrations and models that had sent a chill skittering up her spine: the Minotaur with his great bull's horns in the labyrinth at Knossos; the sea monster Lamia, queen and child-eater; six-headed Scylla, with her triple rows of shark's teeth; the cannibal giants of Lamos; the fire-breathing chimera. What had the Keralises been tampering with? The files were troubling enough, but the gaps and missing pages worried her, too.

Now she looked at the screen filled with an image of Echidna, mother of all monsters, part woman, part snake. There were extensive notes on possible uses for gene therapy and the extraction of DNA, as well as a list of possible sites for Echidna's cave, where she was thought to have died. Diana shuddered. *No wonder I had nightmares*.

Jason emerged from the back of the plane. Somehow he managed to look as formal in jeans and a T-shirt as he had in a suit. He retrieved two bottles of water from the bar and offered her one, then took the seat across the aisle from her and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

He didn't look at her when he said, "I owe you an apology." He turned the bottle of water in his hands. "You put your life at risk to save Alia. All of us. We never would have made it out of the museum without you there." He paused, took a breath. "And I guess I should say that I'm sorry she was at the party in the first place. I'm trying to protect Alia. I'm trying to protect the Keralis name. I don't seem to be doing a good job of either."

"You're doing your best."

To her surprise a slight smile tugged at his lips. "High praise."

Diana couldn't help but smile herself. "I'm sorry. I forget the way people coddle one another here."

Jason barked a laugh, then stifled it as Alia stirred in her sleep. "I'd hardly call it coddling."

“You made a mistake. You acknowledged it. I respect that. Mitigating the repercussions of those choices or their outcome would be a lie that served no one.”

He leaned back in his seat and cast her a sidelong glance. “You’re right. I’m just not used to…people being that straightforward.”

Diana remembered Nim’s description of Jason. “Because you’re rich and handsome?”

Now he grinned that startling, deep-dimpled smile. “Exactly.” He gestured to the open laptop on the seat beside Diana. “My parents raised me on those stories. I thought that’s all they were. Tales of gods and monsters and heroes.”

“Heroes?”

“Theseus—”

“A kidnapper.”

“Hercules—”

“A thief.”

Jason’s brows rose. “Well, you know what I mean. In the books they’re heroes.”

“I think we were raised on different tales.”

“Maybe,” he said. “When I got older, I forgot those stories, and it was all about the comic books. Put on a cape, rescue the girl.”

“Which girl?”

“The girl. There’s always a girl.”

Diana snorted. “We definitely grew up on different stories.”

That grin again. “Did you have a favorite?” he asked.

“Probably the story of Azimech, the double star.”

“I don’t know that one.”

“It’s not very exciting.” That wasn’t true, but it also wasn’t something she wanted to share. “There’s another story I liked, one about an island,” she said cautiously. “A gift from the gods, given to their favored warriors, a place that could never be touched by bloodshed. I liked that story.”

“Now that’s definitely fiction.”

And there was that smug tone again. It made her bristle. “Why?”

“Because no one can stop war entirely. It’s inevitable.”

“In your world, maybe.”

“In any world. The problem isn’t war; it’s what humanity has made of it.”

Diana folded her arms. “I imagine all wars look the same to those who die in them.”

“But it’s so much easier now, isn’t it?” Again, he gestured toward the laptop. “In the old stories, war was a hero striding onto the battlefield with a sword in his hand. It was a monster to be vanquished. But now? It isn’t even a general commanding armies. It’s drones, nuclear stockpiles, air strikes. Some guy can push a button and wipe an entire village off a map.”

Diana knew those words and the horrors associated with them. She'd been schooled in all the ways mortals had found to destroy each other.

"You sound a little like my mother," Diana conceded. "She says people find ways to make life cheap."

"And death."

"Are you afraid to die?" Diana asked curiously.

The terror of the fall came at Alia like a wave. The world rushing up to meet her, her brain trying to remember everything about skydiving at Jason's birthday party and instead spitting out a list of the bones in the human body—every bone she was about to break.

The details of the earth grew clearer—in green, gray, brown, ridges and shadow, clusters of trees. Her fingers fumbled over the latches and bits of metal at her shoulders.

Her body felt heavy, impossibly awkward as she tried to hold the position Jason had described. Jason. She saw the wind grab him, hurl him from the jet. It had happened so fast. A hard fist of despair pressed at her chest, fear and sorrow and disbelief tangling together inside her.

The wind and the pounding of her heart filled her ears. All of that tough talk about Diana killing her for the sake of peace and the only thought in her head: *I do not want to die*. She grabbed hold of the toggle at her hip and yanked hard. A whirring sound. She'd pulled the wrong cord—for a moment she was sure of it, certain she'd made some horrible blunder. Then her body was yanked upward with a hard jolt. A choked sound between a sob and a bleat escaped her lips as the harness dug into her thighs and her momentum slowed. She was pretty sure she'd left her shoulders and pelvis somewhere above.

She forced herself to scan the terrain. She knew she needed to try to find somewhere flat and treeless and steer into the wind. She pulled gently at the toggles, testing them. The world looked alien and mysterious beneath her. Her mind registered barns, houses, cultivated land. She needed a field, someplace flat. She tugged gently at the toggles, turning left, then right, trying to slow her descent.

One moment she was gliding over the shine of a river, and in the next, the earth was too close, speeding by beneath her. She lifted her feet and hit the ground with a painful thud, then tumbled forward, unable to control her momentum. She felt her ankle twist, felt rock scrape along her back and sides. She tucked her knees and rolled. The canopy caught the wind, dragging her along, then finally collapsed. She skidded to a halt.

Alia lay on her side, trying to catch her breath, trying to make her rational mind catch up to the adrenaline coursing through her body. She batted at the latches and straps of her harness and wriggled free. Her left ankle throbbed. She could only hope it wasn't broken. She forced herself to sit up, but every part of her felt like a Jell-O mold that hadn't quite set. She was at the base of a terraced hillside covered in tarps and netting to prevent erosion.

She heard a shrill whir and peered up into the sky, saw a trail of smoke—the jet spiraling downward. It disappeared behind a rise of hills, and Alia heard a loud *boom* that shook the earth beneath her. A scream rose in her throat as a plume of black smoke blossomed from the horizon.

She glimpsed a shape moving through the sky, the translucent bowl of a parachute trailing behind it. Could it be Diana? Ben? One of their attackers?

Alia struggled to her feet. Jason had said there were trackers in the packs. *Jason.*

"Alia!" Nim's voice. Alia had never heard a more beautiful sound. She turned, saw Nim stumbling toward her, and forced herself to stand. They staggered the rest of the distance to each other, and Alia threw her arms around Nim, wishing she could hold her close and keep her safe forever.

"Did you see where Theo came down?" Alia asked.

"No," said Nim. "It all happened so fast."

Alia felt panic swelling up to choke her breath. "Let's get to the top of the hill," she said. "Maybe we can see more."

Alia leaned on Nim, and they scrambled past the tarps and netting as fast as their wobbly legs would carry them. When Alia looked west she could make out a sapphire strip of sea. To the east she saw only farmland.

"There!" she said, pointing to where the parachute was sailing toward the earth near what might be a grain field. It had to be Ben and Diana. *It had to be.* They stumbled down the other side of the hill, Alia limping slightly, trying to walk the pain out of her ankle as Nim rolled the sleeves of her Keralis T-shirt up over her shoulders. It was late afternoon, but the sun above was strong.

Alia wanted to slump down right there, cover her head with her hands, and just scream. She couldn't stop seeing Jason's face as he vanished through the jet door. *Keep going,* she told herself. *Just keep moving. If you stop, you'll have to think.*

They rounded an overgrown hedge, and she thought she heard voices.

Nim's head snapped up. "That sounds like—"

"It can't be," said Alia, but she would have known her brother's voice anywhere. Especially when he sounded angry.

"I don't owe you an explanation," Jason spat. "You've been lying and dodging my questions since the moment we met."

"No ordinary man could do what you did," came Diana's reply.

Alia stepped around the hedge and saw Diana pacing back and forth in a field spotted with poppies, as Jason lay on the ground, trying to untangle himself from a mess of parachute cords. He was alive. He was okay. She didn't care how or why, just that it was so.

"Help me out of this thing," he said to Diana.

"Help yourself," Diana shot back.

Alia exchanged a glance with Nim. "We interrupting?" she asked.

Jason and Diana turned and saw her at the same time. "Alia!" they shouted.

Diana loped toward her and swept Alia up in her arms, swinging her around like a little kid. "You made it!" She threw an arm around Nim's shoulders and pulled them both into a hug. "You made it."

Jason gave a frustrated growl and said, "Would someone please help me out of this thing so I can hug my damn sister?"

Alia limped over to him, tears in her eyes, and said, “Yes, I’ll help, you big grump.”

Diana snapped the lasso tight, and for a moment, its fibers seemed to glow in the dim light of the church. Jason stumbled but kept his footing, thrashing at the end of the rope like a fish on a line. Despite what she'd seen on the jet, the reality of his strength still came as a shock.

"Diana!" Alia yelped.

"Oh dang," said Theo.

"What is that thing *made* of?" said Nim.

Diana ignored them. "Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you?"

"I'm exactly who I said I am," Jason said through gritted teeth.

"How did you catch hold of the jet's wing at those speeds? How did you hang on? What are you, Jason Keralis? Speak."

Jason gave an angry growl, his muscles flexing, the tendons in his neck drawn taut. But he was no match for the lasso's power.

"What's happening to him?" Theo asked, a frantic edge to his voice. "What are you doing?"

"He's fine," said Diana, though she wasn't entirely sure that was so. "The lasso compels the truth."

Jason grimaced. "I am a descendant of Helen and Menelaus, just as Alia is."

Of course he was—he was Alia's brother—but that didn't account for his abilities. "Another Warbringer?"

"Something…else." He spoke the words as if they were being torn from him. "I carry hero's blood. The blood of Menelaus and the Spartan kings before him. My mother and father helped me keep my strength secret."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Alia said. Diana could sense the worry she had for her brother, but the hurt in her voice was clear, too.

"Mom and Dad didn't want anyone to know," said Jason. "It was dangerous for all of us."

"You held back when we fought at the hotel," Diana said as realization dawned.

"I've been holding back my whole life," Jason snarled. "Now get this thing off me."

"Let him go," Alia said. "This is wrong."

Diana narrowed her eyes but let the rope slacken.

Jason pulled it over his head, casting the lasso away from him like a snake. "What the hell is that thing?"

Diana yanked the lasso back. "A necessity in the World of Man. You've been lying this whole time. To all of us."

"And you've been so forthcoming?" He pointed an accusing finger at her. "You come out of nowhere. You shrug off bullet wounds like they're paper cuts. You can outfight my best security guards."

“I’ve made no attempt to hide my gifts,” Diana replied. “The secrets I protect do not just belong to me.”

“You think that lets you off the hook?” Jason made a sound of disgust and stalked through the chapel door. He looked back once over his shoulder. “If you want the truth so damn much, maybe you should think about offering it in return.” He vanished into the dusk.

Alia moved to follow, but Theo laid a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe give him a minute. If there’s one thing Jason hates, it’s feeling out of control.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Alia said to Diana. “You shouldn’t have used that thing on him.”

Diana coiled the rope at her hip, using the time to quell some of her anger. Alia was right. Maybe Jason was right, too. But he was also a hypocrite. The whole time he’d been badgering her for information, he’d been keeping his strength a secret.

“Well,” said Theo into the silence. “I guess now I know why he always wrecked me at basketball.”

Alia cast him a skeptical glance. “I’ve seen you play basketball, Theo. He beat you because you’re terrible.”

With great dignity, Theo stated, “I’m good on the fundamentals.”

Nim hooted. “And I’m the queen of the Netherlands.” She glanced in the direction Jason had gone. “It kind of makes sense, though. Alia, has Jason ever been sick a day in his life?”

Alia shook her head slowly. “No. Never missed a day of school. Never took a day off work. I thought he was just…I don’t know, Jason being Jason. Like a cold wouldn’t dare be caught by him.”

“Also, his sweat smells like pinecones,” said Nim.

Alia’s gaze snapped to her. *“What?”*

Nim blushed and shrugged. “Why do you think I liked his dirty T-shirts so much? He smells like a sexy forest.”

Jason *did* have a pleasing scent. Almost better than new car. But Diana didn’t intend to discuss it.

Alia gagged. “You’re disgusting.”

“I’m honest,” Nim said with a sniff.

“Well, there’s no way I’m going to stop giving him crap about his cologne,” said Theo.

It was almost fully dark now. Diana sighed. “It would be best if Jason didn’t stray far.”

“I’ll go,” Theo said.

“Great idea,” said Nim. “Maybe you can find a ditch to fall into.”

Alia pulled the parachute-tracking screen from her pocket. “Here,” she said, handing it to Theo. “The screen is pretty bright. You can use it as a flashlight.”

“I wish I could use it as a sandwich. Next time we throw ourselves out of a plane, remind me to grab a bag of pretzels.”

Alia pointed toward the grove. “We have olives and also olives.”

“Maybe we can cook and eat Nim,” he grumbled as he headed out the door.

Nim ran a hand through her black hair. “I would be delicious.”

Diana considered offering to go after Jason instead of Theo, but she knew she wasn’t quite ready to apologize, and she doubted he was ready to hear it. Besides, someone needed to remain with Alia.

At least there was one apology she could make and mean. “I’m sorry I lost my temper,” she said quietly.

Alia blew out a long breath. “I’m mad at him, too,” she said. “I’m just so glad he’s alive, I’m having trouble staying mad.”

Maybe that was part of what Diana resented, that horrible moment of watching Jason vanish, of believing he’d been lost for good. She thought of the soldiers they’d left behind on the jet, of Gemma Rutledge, someone she’d never met, a blond girl in a party dress lying dead beside Nim. She thought of Ben’s chest pocked by bullet holes. She’d never known someone who had died. She’d barely known Ben, and yet she felt the weight of loss pressing down on her, all that courage and easy humor gone forever. Jason was right. Death was too easy here.

They bedded down against the cold, packed earth. Eventually, Theo returned with word that Jason would take the first watch.

“Let him sulk,” he said with a shrug, curling onto his side a short distance from Nim and Alia.

Diana wasn’t quite ready to trust Theo. Once the others were breathing deeply, she slipped out of the chapel and crept silently through the trees and underbrush until she spotted Jason’s shape in the dark. His back was to her, his head tilted up at the stars. He looked like a figure carved in stone, a statue of a hero, still standing as everything around him fell to ruin. Or maybe just a lonely boy keeping watch with the stars. What had it been like for him to hide the truth of himself even from his best friend, his sister?

Diana didn’t ask. Without a sound, she turned and made her way back to the chapel. She lay down beside Alia and let herself fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

—

Jason woke her sometime after midnight. He said nothing, and wordlessly, Diana left to take up the watch as he bedded down on the chapel floor.

The hours passed slowly with nothing but her thoughts and the ceaseless buzz of the cicadas to keep her company, but at last the sky began to brighten, and gray dawn light spilled across the grove below. Diana made her way back to the chapel, eager to begin the day’s journey. She pushed open the decaying door and saw Alia sleeping peacefully on her side, Jason on his back, brow creased as if expressing disapproval even in his dreams.

And Nim crouched on top of Theo, her hands locked around his throat. Theo was clawing at her arms, his face red with suffused blood.

"Nim!" she shouted.

The girl turned her head, but the thing looking back at her was not Nim. Her eyes were hollows, her hair a mane of star-strewn night, and from her back sprang the filthy black wings of a vulture. The image flickered and was gone.

Diana launched herself at Nim, knocking her off Theo and rolling with her over the chapel floor.

"What's going on?" Jason said blearily as he and Alia came awake.

But Theo was already shoving to his feet, coughing and gasping. He roared and rushed at Diana and Nim.

In a heartbeat, Jason leapt up and seized Theo's arms, holding him back. "Stop!" he commanded. "Stop it."

Theo thrashed in his grip. "I'll kill that little bitch—"

"You should have died in the crash!" shouted Nim, hissing and spitting as Diana attempted to restrain her without hurting her. "You shouldn't even be here! You're as worthless as your father says!"

Theo snarled. "Fat, ugly, stupid co—"

Jason snagged Theo's jaw in his hands and clamped it shut, silencing him forcibly. "Shut your damned mouth, Theo."

Diana hauled Nim off her feet and slung her over her shoulder, hearing the breath go out of the tiny girl in a disgruntled *whuff*. At least she couldn't keep shouting insults. But Nim did not cease her snarling and struggling until they were several hundred yards away in a stand of cypress trees.

Diana dumped her onto the scraggly grass.

"Nim," said Alia, coming up behind them. "What the hell?"

"I…" Nim panted. "I…" She unballed her fists, a look of horror dawning on her face. Her shoulders slumped, and she burst into tears. "I wanted to kill him. I *tried* to kill him."

Alia met Diana's gaze. "It's getting worse, isn't it?"

Diana nodded. Maybe the terror of the past few days had made Theo and Nim more susceptible to Alia's power, or maybe it was simply the coming of the new moon. Only one thing was certain: They were running out of time.

"We have to find some way to keep them separated," said Alia.

"You're not leaving me here," Nim said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Alia offered her a hand. "That wasn't what I was suggesting, you nerd. But we have to do something before you guys murder each other."

"We'll just have to try to keep them apart as much as possible," said Diana.

"Being near you helps," Nim said.

Alia's brows rose. "Are you saying that because you enjoy being carried like a sack of flour by a cute girl?"

Nim planted her hands on her hips. "I'm serious. As soon as she separated me from Theo, I could feel my mind start to clear. It just took a little while for the rest of me to catch up."

“It’s possible,” said Diana. “Remember how you were healthier when you were near me on the island?”

“Okay,” said Alia. “But we have to watch them. I’m not going to be responsible for my friends killing—”

Diana caught a flicker of movement from the olive grove below. “Silence,” she whispered.

There were dark shapes moving through the trees. They were still far enough away that Diana could just make them out, but they were drawing closer, and Diana could only whisper a prayer of thanks that they hadn’t overheard her conversation with Alia and Nim. She needed to be more cautious. They all did.

Diana gestured for Alia and Nim to follow, and as quietly as they could, they traced their steps back to the chapel.

“Maybe they’re not looking for us?” Nim murmured.

“Yeah,” whispered Alia. “They’re probably going to use those guns to shoot the olives off the trees.”

Theo and Jason were seated near the entry. Theo’s eyes narrowed as they drew closer, but Diana laid a hand on his shoulder and some of the tension in his body seemed to ease.

“There are armed men approaching the chapel,” she said.

Jason was on his feet instantly. “Damn it,” he said. “We need to get out of here.”

“We need a car,” said Alia.

Jason shook his head. “What if they’re watching the roads?”

“He’s right,” said Diana. “They may even have set up roadblocks. We’d be better off continuing on foot until we can get farther from the crash site.”

They did their best to hide the evidence of the night they’d spent in the chapel and hurried down the south slope of the hill, keeping away from the main highway, scurrying over fields that offered little cover, through orchards where they plucked their breakfast from the trees, and past a scrubby pasture where a scrawny goat bleated furiously at them as they passed. In a small backyard, they found a clothesline strung with damp laundry, and Nim and Theo exchanged their Keralis Labs shirts for a linen undershirt and a bright-blue button-down.

The previous night, they’d tacked east, but now they moved back toward the coast, where campers and beachgoers might provide some camouflage for their oddly dressed crew. At one point, they crested a series of low ridges and Diana caught a view of the bright waters of the Ionian Sea. The blue was more like her home waters than the sullen slate of the Atlantic, but it was still nothing compared to the coast of Themyscira. She was closer to home than she’d been since she’d crossed into the World of Man, and yet she’d never felt farther away.

As they looked out at the water, Diana was startled to hear Nim say, “Sorry about this morning, Theo.”

Theo kept his eyes trained on the sea. “I’m sorry I called you names. You’re not fat or ugly.”

Nim cut him a glance. “I am fat, Theo, and far too hot for your sorry ass.”

A smile flashed over Theo’s face. “I think you mean my worthless ass.”

Diana couldn’t help but respect their willingness to set their anger aside. She knew those insults must have stung.

They continued on, keeping as much distance as they could between Theo and Nim without losing sight of each other, just in case the reconciliation didn’t take. The situation suited Diana just fine, since it meant she and Jason had to stay away from each other, too. They hadn’t spoken a word since the previous night, and Diana wavered between feeling that was best for everyone and crafting an apology in her head.

She matched her pace to Theo’s. He’d removed his new shirt and tied it around his head, revealing dark freckles on his narrow brown shoulders.

“Theo?” she began.

“Yes, Big Mama?”

She raised a brow at the nickname. “This morning, when Nim was—”

“Trying to kill me?”

“Yes. Did you see…anything odd?”

“You mean like a hideous winged hellbeast?”

Diana didn’t know whether to feel relieved or distressed. “Exactly.”

“Yeah, I saw it,” said Theo. He shivered despite the heat of the sun. “When I looked into her eyes, they were…ancient, and I could feel…”

“What?” Diana prodded.

“She was happy. No, *gleeful*.” He shuddered and shook his arms as if trying to rid himself of the memory.

“She had wings, black eyes, what else?”

“Wild hair—not really hair at all, like you were looking into the dark—and gold smeared all over her lips.”

Diana hadn’t noticed the gold on her mouth. Her stomach clenched. “Gold from the apple of discord. That was Eris, the goddess of strife.”

“A *goddess*?”

Diana nodded, her stomach churning at the possibility. She had been raised to worship the goddesses of the island, to make the proper sacrifices, speak the appropriate prayers. She knew they could be generous in their gifts and terrible in their judgment. But she had never *seen* a god, and she knew they didn’t make a habit of revealing themselves to mortals, either. “She’s a battlefield god. She incites discord and thrives on the misery it creates.”

Again, Theo shuddered. “It was like there was a chorus in my head, egging me on. I hated Nim. I would have killed her if I had the chance. I didn’t just feel mad—I felt *righteous*.” He blinked. “And I’m a lover, not a fighter!”

“There are others,” said Diana. “The Algea, full of weeping,” she recited. “Até, who brings ruin; Limos, the bone soldier of famine. The brother gods, Phobos and Deimos.”

“Panic and Dread,” said Jason, catching up to them.

“And the Keres.”

“What do they do, exactly?” asked Theo.

“They eat the corpses of warriors as they die.”

He winced. “Maybe we don’t need to stop for lunch.”

“Is it possible Alia’s power is drawing them?” asked Jason.

“I don’t know what’s possible anymore,” Diana admitted. It was a frightening thought.

She loped ahead to scout the territory before them. She needed to think, and she wanted to be away from mortals for a moment, from their squabbles and hungers and wants.

The landscape here reminded her of parts of Themyscira, but there was no mistaking this place for anything but the World of Man. She could hear the rumble of cars in the distance, smell burning fuel in the air, hear the buzz and crackle of telephone lines. Through all of it, in the pulse and flow of her blood, she could still feel the pain and worry of her sisters on the island. She hated that they suffered, that she’d been the one to cause it, but she couldn’t deny that she was grateful for the connection, for the reminder of who and what she was.

Had she and Theo truly seen Eris? The gods of battle had been the creatures of her earliest nightmares. They were the enemies of peace, more terrifying than ordinary monsters because their power didn’t lie in jagged teeth or terrible strength but in their ability to drive soldiers to the worst atrocities, to drown the empathy and mercy of warriors in terror and rage so they were capable of things they’d never imagined. What if Jason was right and they were coming to the mortal world, drawn by the prospect of war?

As the day wore on, the heat rose, and the group’s pace slowed. By late morning, Diana could see that Alia’s steps were weaving and Nim was bleary-eyed from exhaustion. She dropped back to talk to Jason.

“We can’t keep on this way. We’re going to have to get a car and risk the roadblocks.”

“Seconded,” said Nim over her shoulder. “Or you’re going to have to leave me by the side of the road.”

“Well—” began Theo. Alia hurled an olive at him.

“We can’t stay away from the roads forever,” said Diana. “They’re just going to keep widening the perimeter of their search. Besides, there’s no way we can make it over the Taygetus Mountains on foot, not before the new moon.”

“Is there another way around?” asked Theo.

Alia shook her head. “Not without backtracking north. Therapne is backed by mountains to the east and west. It’s part of what made Sparta so easy to defend.”

Diana grinned, surprised, and Jason cast Alia a speculative look. “How do you know so much about it?”

“I did a lot of reading on the plane. I wanted to know about Helen. Where she came from.” She wiped the sweat from her brow and glanced at Diana. “You realize you’re suggesting stealing a car?”

“I’m suggesting *borrowing* a car,” Diana corrected. “Surely there’s a way to compensate the owner.”

Theo reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “I have twenty-six bucks and my Better Latte Than Never card. Only one more stamp for a free cappuccino.”

“Wait a minute,” said Jason. “Can any of us even drive?”

“I drove,” said Theo. “Once.”

“That was a golf cart,” said Alia.

“So? It had four wheels and went *vroom*.”

“You crashed it into a tree.”

“I’ll have you know that tree had been drinking.”

“Everybody, relax,” said Nim. “I can drive.”

“Where did you learn to drive?” Alia asked incredulously.

“With the rest of the peasants on Long Island.”

“We have a driver,” Diana said, new hope surging through her. “Now we just need to find a car.”

“You know this means I get to choose the radio station,” said Nim as they set out across the field.

Theo whimpered. “How about I just let you run me over?”

—

It took far longer to locate a car than they’d hoped. Many of the farms they passed didn’t seem to have much in the way of vehicles beyond donkey carts and bicycles, and in one case, a truck set up on cement blocks, its wheels long vanished.

As they were approaching a promising-looking farmhouse with Jason in the lead, he snapped, “Get down.”

They sank to their bellies in the grass just as two men emerged from the front door of the house.

“Police?” whispered Alia.

“Those guns don’t look like standard police issue.”

They drove on, all of them weary and shaken. They'd faced bullets, missiles, a plane crash. Still, thought Alia, it was different to know that the forces allied against you weren't just humans who happened to be better trained and armed, but that actual gods were trying to take you down.

For a while, Diana and Jason passed the map back and forth, debating the best route to take to Therapne. They could save hours by cutting east across one of the major highways, but those roads would also probably be the most closely watched. Instead, they agreed to keep heading south to a twisting mountain road that would take them directly through the Taygetus. It was steep, empty of people, and rarely used by anyone but tourists eager for scenery. The sharp cliffs and rock overhangs also meant they'd be hard to get eyes on from the air.

The sun sank low over the horizon, and Nim's pace slowed. They used their brights when they could, but sometimes they had to double back when they missed road signs, and they were all getting sleepy. Nim's yawns grew more frequent. They rolled down the windows, turned the radio up loud. Jason kept offering her swigs of sugary soda from their supplies. But it was no good.

"I'm sorry," she said. "If I don't stop, I'm going to fall asleep at the wheel."

"It's okay," Alia said gently. She could sense Diana's frustration with their progress, but she also knew Nim had pushed as hard as she could. They all had. If the gods had meant to scare them off, they'd failed.

They'd been wending their way down the eastern side of a steep series of hills, and when they reached a flat-enough area, Nim steered the car carefully off the road behind a stand of lush poplars and brush that would hide the car from anyone on the road.

"We'll camp tonight," said Jason. "If we get an early start tomorrow, we'll be in Therapne long before sunset."

"We have to be," said Diana. "At dawn, the new moon rises and Hekatombaion begins."

Nim punched a button and the car's engine went silent. She turned off the headlights.

"We have the blankets Diana took from the farmhouse," said Jason. "Two people can sleep in the car."

"Or we could all sleep in the car," said Theo. "Not that I'm afraid of the dark. Which I am not."

Nim's hands gripped the steering wheel. "I'm not sure that's a great idea. Not if our…friends come back."

They opened the Fiat's doors and stepped outside into the balmy air. The stars glimmered brightly, gilding the trees around them in silver. Diana dropped into a lunge, stretching her long legs, and Alia felt a pang of sympathy. If she felt this stiff after being crammed in that car, Diana must really have been hurting.

"Do you hear that?" said Theo. "It sounds like running water."

They picked their way through the trees and brush toward the sound and emerged at the top of a wide outcropping of rock. Alia took a deep breath, something in her heart eased by the beauty of what she saw.

A waterfall. Two waterfalls, really. One that fed the small pool beside them, and another that cascaded over the rocks in a misty white veil, emptying into a wide, dark pond below.

Theo picked up a rock and tossed it over the cliff. It hit the surface with a resonant *plunk,* sending silver ripples marching toward shore. “Seems pretty deep.”

“Look,” said Nim. “A bell.”

She was right. An old iron bell hung from a metal bar that had been driven between the rocks. “I think there’s a cave back there,” said Alia. “But why a bell?”

“It might be a hermit cave,” said Diana. “Mystics—”

But her voice was cut off by the sound of Theo’s whoop as he ran past them stark naked and leapt off the rock. A tremendous splash sounded, and they raced to the edge to see him emerge in the frothing water and shake his head like a dog.

Did I really just see Theo Santos naked? Alia thought. *Do not giggle,* she warned herself, but it was really hard when her mind kept conjuring up the image of Theo’s starlit backside.

“Good news!” he called from below. “It’s deep enough!”

“He is *unhinged,*” said Nim.

Diana frowned. “How did he even get his clothes off that fast?”

“We don’t have time for this,” Jason grumbled.

Diana packed dirt over the remnants of the campfire to make sure they wouldn't catch again, and wondered if she should apologize to Alia. After Alia had scurried up the hill, they'd all stared at each other for a long moment in tense silence, Theo standing awkwardly at the edge of the fire.

"Should I—" he'd hazarded.

"No," Nim had said. "Just let her shake it off, and then pretend it never happened."

"But—"

"She's right," Diana had said, though she'd wanted to follow Alia herself. She'd dealt with her fair share of humiliations, trailing after her mother and her Amazon sisters, always the slowest, always the last, excluded from their understanding of the world. When her pride was smarting, she didn't want to be reminded of her failures. She wanted the solitude of the cliffs. She wanted to be alone until the hurt dwindled, until it was small enough to pack away. "Just let her be."

Jason peered up at Theo and raised a brow. "She sent you a *love* letter?"

"It wasn't a big deal."

"How come you never mentioned it?"

Theo had jammed his hands in his pockets. "She was just a kid. I didn't want to embarrass her."

"Why did you even ask that stupid question?" Nim said grumpily.

His shoulders shot up to his ears. "I thought she would say something dumb, like she drank too much fruit punch and vomited on her bunk at sleepaway camp."

"That seems awfully specific," said Diana.

"Yeah, well, it could happen to anyone. Don't we need to get some rest? Big day tomorrow? Mystical cleansing?"

"I'm going back to the car," said Nim. "I know Alia needs her space, but if I stay down here much longer, I'm going to try to drown Theo in the pond."

Nim had headed up the hill, but as they'd gathered their empty chip bags and soda bottles and extinguished the fire, Diana's mind was still on Alia. Though the stories of the lasso and what it might accomplish were so varied she hadn't known what to expect, she still felt guilty.

Mortals weren't meant to trifle with these things—and her mother would have been furious if she'd known Diana was playing party games with a sacred weapon. Although she supposed it would be the least of the things her mother would be furious about right now. She ran her thumb over the golden fibers, the lasso glowing faintly at her touch. It felt oddly friendly, like another companion who traveled with them. It wasn't meant to sit behind glass in a cold room. She'd read once that there were jewels that required wearing to keep their luster. She couldn't help but feel that the bracelets, the lasso, even the heartstone still tucked into her pocket, were gifts that weren't meant to be locked away.

She looked up to realize that Jason was studying her.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Why?" She rose and dusted her hands off on her leathers as they started up the trail.

"He's hoping you're thinking about him," said Theo with a laugh.

Jason gave Theo a light shove that nearly sent him careening into a tree.

"Hey!" said Theo. "Use your words!"

Diana cast Jason a swift glance. His jaw was set, his shoulders stiff as always. *Was* that what he'd been wondering? Or, as Alia would say, was Theo just being Theo?

She cleared her throat. "I'm wondering what tomorrow might bring," she said. "I can't imagine it will be as simple as just finding the spring. We don't know what might be waiting for us."

"Sure we do," said Theo, swatting at a branch. "We get to the spring, Alia gets cured. We argue over the best choice for our We Saved the World victory dance."

"I do enjoy your optimism," said Diana.

"And I admire your ability to lift a car over your head without breaking a sweat and look fine as hell doing it," said Theo with a bow.

"Why do I have the feeling it's not going to be as easy as you think?" Jason said.

"Because you're a glass-half-empty kind of guy."

"Whereas you're an it-will-all-work-out-or-someone-else-will-take-care-of-it kind of guy?"

"Unfair."

"I'm serious, Theo. If this all goes to hell, you can't just reboot or re-up or whatever."

"You mean one-up. And good to know you're concerned, even if you did think I was some kind of traitor."

"Theo—" Jason attempted.

Theo clapped Jason on the back. "I get it, okay? Just maybe give me a little more credit. You guys are my family. More than my dad has ever been. Besides, without me you'd currently be riding a mule over a mountaintop."

"The mule would talk less," Jason noted.

"Probably smell better, too," said Theo.

Was it really that simple? A shared joke, a pat on the back, forgiveness given when no apology had been offered? She'd seen Jason's frustration with Theo's glib ways, Theo's irritation at how easily Jason dismissed him. But they seemed perfectly happy to avoid talking about any of it. Boys were peculiar creatures.

Diana left Jason and Theo to set up their makeshift camp across the clearing from the car. Through the windows of the Fiat, she could see Alia and Nim already dozing. She hated to wake them.

“Sorry,” she whispered as she slipped inside and used two knotted socks to bind Nim’s hands together.

“It’s okay,” said Nim sleepily. “My mom duct-taped oven mitts on my hands when I had the chicken pox.”

Diana wasn’t sure what cooking and infectious diseases had to do with anything, but she made a polite humming noise.

She shifted in the passenger seat, trying to find a comfortable position, listening to the quiet of the night. She wanted to sleep, but the car was miserably cramped, and her mind didn’t want to shut down. A run might help.

She slipped outside as silently as she could. Someone was snoring loudly from the other side of the clearing, and based on the timbre, she suspected it was Theo. Diana stretched, then walked back to the outcropping to listen to the rush of the waterfall and see if she could find another trail.

She was surprised to see Jason standing there, gazing out at the water. He’d shed his shirt again, possibly to bind Theo’s hands, and the mist from the falls had beaded on his skin.

As if sensing her presence, he turned sharply.

“Sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t spying. I couldn’t sleep.” Well, maybe she’d been spying a little. She liked looking at him. But hadn’t Nim said that most girls did?

“Me neither,” he said. “Theo snores.”

“So I heard.”

Jason looked back out at the falls. “What if it doesn’t work?” he said quietly.

Diana didn’t ask what he meant. “The Oracle didn’t lie.”

“Then maybe she made a mistake. Oracles have been wrong before.”

“Not this one.”

He leaned against the rock by the bell and crossed his arms. “Would you have played the game if we’d kept going?”

“With the lasso? I don’t know. Would you have?”

He expelled a short breath. “Absolutely not.”

Diana perched beside him on the rock. “I meant what I said. I’m sorry for using the lasso on you.”

Jason shrugged, the muscles shifting smoothly beneath his skin. “What I am, what I can do, I’ve kept it secret a long time. Keeping people out gets to be a habit.”

“I shouldn’t have forced my way in. Truth means something different when it’s given freely.”

He tilted his head back, watching the stars. “Early on, my parents saw that I was stronger than the other kids, faster. And I liked to fight. I was on the way to becoming a bully. They taught me to hold back, to be careful not to hurt anyone. But sometimes I feel it in my blood, the desire to use this strength, to prove myself.”

Diana tried not to show her surprise. This was exactly the behavior she'd been told to expect in the World of Man. And yet, Jason recognized the urge to violence that had been passed down to him through the Keralis line. He'd struggled to temper it.

"Is that why you value control so highly?"

"It's that. But it's also the way I was raised. My mom taught Alia and me that our money could only protect us so much. People would be waiting for us to fail, to prove we didn't deserve what we had."

"I know that feeling," she admitted.

He cast her a skeptical glance. "Do you? It's a trap for us. Alia and I always have to be better. We always have to be a step ahead. But the stronger you get, the more you achieve, the more people want to make sure you know your place." He bumped the back of his head gently against the rock. "It's exhausting. And all that caution doesn't leave much room for greatness."

Maybe she understood less than she thought. On the island, Diana had always known her failures meant more, but she'd also known her achievements would be her own, that if she ran quickly enough, fought hard enough, thought fast enough, her sisters would treat her victories with respect.

She nudged her arm against his. "It wasn't stupid. What you said on the plane. We all want a taste of greatness."

Jason turned his head to look at her. "What if you want more than a taste?"

Something in those words made her pulse quicken. "How much more?"

"I don't know." His gaze shifted back to the sky. "You take a bite. You take another. How are you supposed to know when you'll be full?"

I see you, Daughter of Earth. I see your dreams of glory.

"Then your desire to run Keralis Labs, your parents' legacy—"

"Their legacy," he repeated, and released a bitter laugh. "Do you know some part of me wants to believe Alia's power caused the car accident that killed our parents?"

Diana drew in a sharp breath, and he glanced at her, dark eyes glinting.

"How's that for truth?" he said. "It's why I pushed Michael so hard on the investigation. I wanted there to be a conspiracy, an explanation, a reason for all of it. If wanting to do great deeds isn't stupid, that is. It's the way little kids think."

What would it do to someone to lose so much in a single night? Who wouldn't search for order, for some measure of control?

"You wanted to find meaning in their deaths," she said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Jason pushed off the rock and prowled to the edge of the cliff. "I wanted to remake the world. Make it into something I understood." He crossed his arms, profile turned to the sky, and she remembered seeing him alone in the orchard, a stone sentinel, keeping the watch. "I still do."

"That's why you want to retain control of the company."

He cocked his head to one side and slowly made his way back to the rock. “Why do I feel like I’m always the one who ends up talking instead of you?”

“I’m an excellent listener?” she ventured.

He snorted. “I’ll make you a deal. We’ll play twenty questions. You answer, and I’ll forgive you for the lasso.”

She cut a hand through the air. “Twenty is way too many.”

“Ten.”

“Three.”

“Three?” he said incredulously. “That’s nothing!”

She thought she knew what he would ask, and she felt ready to tell him the truth about who and what she was—maybe not all of it, but some. She’d taken that much from him by force. She could give it back.

Diana shrugged. “In the stories it’s always three. Three wishes. Three questions.”

He sighed and settled next to her on the rock again. “Fine. But you have to tell the truth.”

“As much as I can.”

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Okay, Diana Prince, do you have a boyfriend back home?”

She laughed. That wasn’t what she’d expected at all.

“No.”

“A girlfriend?”

“No. You realize you’re terrible at this, right? That was two questions.”

“But—”

“Rules are rules. One more question, Jason Keralis.”

She waited. She knew what he would ask next.

“Fine,” he said. “What’s the story of the double star?”

She sat up straighter, surprised. No questions about her home? Her people? “You remember that?”

“Yes, and I knew you didn’t want to tell me about it.”

She scowled. “Am I that easy to read?”

“Maybe I’m just an excellent listener. Go on. Story.”

Diana leaned back against the rock, listening to the wind in the pines. This was a different kind of secret to share. She’d already admitted the story was her favorite. She didn’t want to look foolish.

She studied the night sky. “Do you know how to find Ursa Major?”

“The Big Dipper?” said Jason. “Sure.”

She pointed, tracing a path. “If you follow the handle, you’ll see Arcturus there beside it. And if you keep going, you’ll see the star known as the Horn, or Azimech. It’s one of the brightest in the sky.”

“Can’t miss it.”

“But it has a secret.”

He clucked his tongue. “Never a good idea.”

"Never," she agreed. "It's really two stars, orbiting the same center of gravity, so close they're indistinguishable. The story is that there was a great warrior, Zoraida, who swore she would never give herself to anyone but her equal. But none could best her in battle."

"I'm guessing this is where the hero enters."

"Zoraida is the hero. But another champion did come to try to win her, a man just as prideful and just as strong. He swore he would defeat her or die in the endeavor, and so, on a rosy dawn, they met and clashed, Zoraida with her trusted axe in hand, and Agathon with a sword that gleamed bright as morning." Diana closed her eyes, remembering the words of the story. "From the start, it was clear they were evenly matched, and the valley echoed with the sounds of the blows they rained down on each other. On and on they fought, for hours and then days. And when Zoraida's axe shattered on Agathon's gauntlet, and Agathon's sword broke against Zoraida's shield, still they battled, neither willing to cede victory."

"Who won?" said Jason.

Diana opened her eyes. "Neither. Or both. Depending on how you look at it. As they fought, their respect for each other grew. They fell in love, but as they were matched in strength, so were they matched in stubbornness. They died in each other's arms and, with their last breaths, spoke their vows. The gods placed them in the sky, where they might remain forever, neither diminished by the other's brightness, ruling their corner of the night in haughty isolation."

"*That's* your favorite story?" Jason's brows were raised in the bemused expression she was coming to expect from him.

"Yes," she said defensively.

"That is some grim stuff. You a Romeo and Juliet fan, too?"

Diana scoffed. "Hardly. I prefer Benedick and Beatrice."

"But they weren't doomed!"

"Doomed isn't a necessity."

"Just a nice perk?"

Diana threw up her hands. "It's a tragic love story."

"I mean, it's definitely *tragic*."

"It's romantic. They found their equals." From the first time Diana had heard Zoraida's story, she'd been fascinated by it. It had seemed filled with all of the danger and enticement of the World of Man. What would it mean to want someone so much but hold to your beliefs in spite of it? If she'd lost her heart to Agathon, would she have given in or kept to her vow? Maybe the story was a *little* melodramatic, but that didn't mean she had to stop loving it. She turned to find Jason watching her again. "Why didn't you ask me about the island?" she said. "Where I'm from?"

He smiled, and his dimple made a shadow in his cheek. "Truth means something different when it's given freely." He bobbed his head toward the valley. "How far away do you think that mountain peak is?"

Diana grinned. "Let's find out."

With a laugh, they were plunging down the hill, past the pond, through the silver wood.

Diana shot past him, leaping over a fallen log, under a low branch, her heart pounding a happy rhythm as the forest unfolded before her. She burst from its trees onto a gravelly hillside, sliding more than running as the powdery soil gave way beneath her feet in a shower of pebbles. She heard Jason whoop somewhere behind her, struggling to keep up but apparently enjoying every minute of it.

They were on open ground now, low rolling hills pocked with boulders and scrub clinging to rough planes of granite. She heard Jason's steady footsteps, and then he was running beside her, matching her step for step. *He's not hiding anymore,* she realized. She laughed, and his smile flashed white in the darkness.

Diana let go and ran. *You do not enter a race to lose.*

She felt the slap of her sandals against the earth, the stars whirling above her. She didn't bother to pace herself or to worry about how far or how high the mountain might be. She simply ran, Jason's steps pushing her faster, the hound at the heels of the stag—but she felt no fear, only exhilaration. She didn't need to worry about what it might mean to lose or how she should comport herself as a princess. There was only the race, the desire to win, the thrill of her wild heartbeat matched to his as they leapt the rocky gully of a stream and began to climb the peak's steep slope, pushing through thorny scrub and fragrant pine until…there, an old cart track, barely visible, overgrown with weeds and broken by tree roots.

Diana hooted in triumph as her feet met the path, sprinting higher to where the trees were sparse, their trunks bent and twisted by the wind. They looked like women, frozen in a mad dance, the tangle of their hair tossed forward in abandon, their backs arched in ecstasy or bent in supplication, a processional of dancers that led Diana up the mountainside.

Run, they whispered, *for this is what happens if you let your feet take root.* But wasn't that the life Diana's sisters had chosen? Bound to one spot, safe but locked out of time, preparing for a war that might never come?

She rounded a bend and saw the crest of the peak before her, a small shrine near its apex, a Madonna surrounded by withered flowers and packages of sweets, small offerings. Diana somehow knew that there had always been shrines here, holy places where the gods' names were spoken, where prayers were offered beneath the black and limitless sky.

She put on a spurt of speed, lengthened her stride, and gave a shout as she passed the shrine and reached the mountain's highest peak, raising her arms in victory.

Jason padded up behind her, jogging the last few yards. His laugh was breathless as he bent double, hands on his knees. "Not nice to gloat," he panted.

Diana grinned. "We should have made a wager."

She gazed out over the valley to the peaks of the Taygetus far in the distance, a world painted in black and silver, the sky a dark vault of stars. It

seemed to go on and on, unbounded by seas or barriers, a world that might take a hundred human lifetimes to explore. But when they reached the spring, she would have to leave all of these horizons behind.

"Well, I guess I'm no Agathon," Jason said. "I barely kept up with you."

She gave him a grudging nod. "You kept up fine."

"Did I?" he asked, and somehow she knew that was not really the question he was asking. Starlight gilded the lines of his profile as he turned to her.

"Yes," she said, the sound caught on a breath.

Jason leaned forward, and she felt her own weight shift as if snared by his gravity, by the shape of his lips, by the shift of muscle beneath his skin. His mouth met hers, warm and smooth, the first summer plum, ripe with promise, and hunger bloomed in her like an eager vine, its tendrils uncurling low in her stomach. He slid his hand into her hair, drawing her closer. But beneath his strength and speed, she could feel how very mortal he was, his life as fleeting as a kiss, a captured spark. He would not last. And so she let herself feel the fierce beat of his heart, the heat of his skin, the ferocity of a life that would shine for the barest moment, there and then gone.

Alia woke at dawn to birdsong—and a crescent moon visible on the horizon, a slender, perfect scythe. The reaping moon. Hekatombaion had begun. *We're almost there,* she reminded herself. *We just have to reach the spring before sunset.*

Either binding Theo and Nim during the night had done the trick or the gods of battle had found some other group of people to harass because no one seemed to be screaming or trying to commit murder. Diana and Jason were already awake, the last of their food stores set out on a rock as they debated the merits of which route to take to Therapne and how they hoped to find the spring once they were there. They sat close together, their shoulders almost touching, the animosity that had hummed between them since that first meeting at the Good Night seemingly gone. *Maybe it wasn't animosity,* she considered as she rolled her head, trying to work the crick out of her neck. *Ugh.* If Jason was making moves on her friends, she didn't want to know about it. *Though he could definitely do worse.*

Alia left Nim still snoozing in the reclined driver's seat and went to wash her face and hands in the upper pool of the falls. She heard Theo before she saw him, the happy whistle of some song she didn't recognize floating around the bend in the path. Before she could turn and run, he was rounding the corner in his shiny, battered trousers and the stolen blue button-down that now seemed to be missing its sleeves. He was carrying the full water jug in front of him with both skinny arms and stopped dead when he saw her. His crop of locs looked more awake than he did.

"Hey," he said.

Well, this isn't going to be awkward at all. "Hi," said Alia, making her best effort to sound normal. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good, good. You?"

"Great," she said, continuing past him toward the falls. *Easy. Now you just have to spend a few hours crammed in a car with him. No problem.*

She heard a *thunk*

Instead of returning to the pass, they took the back roads. Whether it was the scare with Deimos and his kin or the fact that they had only three proper tires, Diana wasn't sorry Nim had tempered her exuberant driving style, and they progressed at a more reasonable pace. The Fiat had been badly banged up, its back bumper dented and its cheerful tangerine paint scratched along both sides, but its engine still hummed and it soldiered on. It seemed as if the Fiat and Nim were kindred spirits, tiny and indefatigable.

Human courage was different from Amazon bravery. She saw that now. For all the suspicion and derision she'd heard from her mother and her sisters about the mortal world, Diana couldn't help but admire the people with whom she traveled. Their lives were violent, precarious, fragile, but they fought for them anyway, and held to the hope that their brief stay on this earth might count for something. That faith was worth preserving.

The road they took away from the gorge was gentler, leading down into the vast green valley watered by the Eurotas River and bordered by the peaks of the Parnon Mountains beyond. It felt like a modern road, its wide lanes and mild curves leading them back to signs of civilization. The passing scenery made a strange dissonance, boxy houses with television aerials on their roofs and shiny cars in their driveways nudged right up against tumbling stone ruins or the crenellated walls of some ancient monastery.

It was neither city nor country, but eventually they passed through a small town, the patios of the little hotels on its main square pocked with fat palms. Clouds of orange trees hung over whitewashed walls, and the air was sweet with the smell of their fruit.

Then they were moving on, speeding through flat groves of olive trees bordered by metal fences, past a church capped in terracotta tiles and built of stone that glowed gold like the terraces of Themyscira, until the road was dappled by the shade of plane trees and quivering fronds of fern. The countryside became suburbs, and those gave way to a modern town, wide boulevards bracketed by apartment buildings, offices, open-air cafés set with plastic umbrellas, metal streetlamps marching steadily toward the town center.

"God, it feels so ordinary here," said Nim.

It was all still too new to Diana to feel ordinary, but they were surrounded by traffic, people. It felt safe somehow, as if the modern world might beat back the terror of the old gods. Too soon they were jogging north and crossing the Eurotas.

As they passed over the river, Alia murmured, "We're close, aren't we?"

"Only a few miles left," said Jason. He tapped a nervous rhythm on his thigh, every muscle in his body taut with worry. It was hard for Diana to believe he was the same boy who had run with her, laughing beneath the stars, who had kissed her on a mountain peak. She shook the thought from her head.

"Does it feel different to you here?" she asked Alia. The landscape had changed subtly once again, grown more lush. They passed gated quarries, and

here the olive trees' twisting gray trunks emerged from soft green grass. Even the color of the rock had changed from gray to a rich red.

Alia let her hand float outside of the window, riding the currents. "It feels familiar."

Clouds scudded across the sky, and the air blew cool against Diana's skin as the road began to climb through the low hills.

"No cars," said Theo. "No tour buses. I guess we'll have the tomb to ourselves."

"They forgot her," said Alia. "Everyone remembers Helen of Troy. But she was from Sparta; this was her home. The queen who lived and died here, they forgot."

Nim's pace had slowed to a crawl as she wended around the road's wide, lazy curves. "Does it seem…I don't know, too quiet to anyone?"

Alia shivered and rubbed her arms. "You mean like something's going to go horribly wrong?"

"You know what they say," said Theo. "Don't shoot a gift horse in the mouth."

"I'm pretty sure that's not what they say," said Nim.

Alia took a deep breath. "Everybody just…stay relaxed."

Jason shifted uneasily in the passenger seat, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Diana knew they were all thinking the same thing. After the horrors of the pass, there should have been something worse waiting for them as they neared the spring, and yet there was no sign of trouble.

The road climbed steadily, surrounded on all sides by rocky pasture, more olive trees, the stark trunks of telephone poles. They passed through a small town that seemed to appear up against the hills for no reason and a large cemetery blooming around a church like a crop of white crosses.

As it turned out, the sign for the tomb was so small they had to double back twice before they found it—a dented metal rectangle tilting woozily on its metal pole, nearly hidden by yellow wildflowers. The words were written in Greek and English: *Menelaion, Sanctuary of Menelaus and Helen.*

"At least she made it onto the sign," muttered Alia.

There was nowhere to hide the Fiat, so they had to park it up against the dirt shoulder of the road.

"It feels weird to just leave her out here in the open," said Alia.

"It's a girl?" said Theo.

"Sure. Isn't it obvious?"

"This feels too easy," Diana murmured to Jason, as they fell in step behind the others.

"It's possible we lost whoever attacked us on the jet," he replied, eyes scanning the surroundings. "They had no way of knowing we were headed to some obscure tomb."

"Even so, where's Eris? Where are the twins? They don't need satellites to track us."

“They could still make a showing,” he said.

They might. But another voice spoke inside Diana—what if it had all been a ruse? The Oracle had said the spring at Therapne, but what if Diana had somehow misunderstood. Maybe there was some other place sacred to Helen. Maybe Eris and her horrible nephews had just been a distraction, driving them on, making sure they were focused on the wrong target as the hours until Hekatombaion winnowed away.

“Diana,” said Jason, startling her from her thoughts. His hand brushed the back of hers, and she remembered how it had felt to kiss him beneath the night sky. “When this is over, will you go home?”

“Yes,” she said without thinking.

“Ah.” He trained his eyes on the ground. “For good?”

How could she explain the rules of the island? She supposed that, after all of this, even if they succeeded, she might be exiled. But time passed differently on Themyscira. While Diana was tried and sentenced, years would pass in the mortal world. And even if she could somehow find her way back to her friends, could that ever temper the pain of losing her home? Of never seeing her mother or her sisters again?

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t belong here, Jason.”

“But you could,” he said, still not looking at her. “In time.”

“Is this it?” said Theo from up ahead, standing near the top of the hill, hands on hips.

The ruins were less dramatic than Diana had expected. She knew there had once been a vast settlement here, shrines and temples dedicated to Helen and her husband. But now all that remained were a few overgrown foundations surrounding an unimpressive pile of earth that looked like a cross between a burial mound and what might have once been a temple, its stone walls slowly being swallowed by wildflowers. Beyond it, the green bowl of the valley glowed golden, as if the sun had pooled between the mountain ranges, glinting off the banks of the Eurotas far below.

“It doesn’t look like much,” said Nim. “And where’s the spring?”

“Maybe it’s a metaphorical spring,” said Theo. “Like the spring is inside all of us?”

“Why didn’t I run you over when I had the chance?”

“Diana?” said Alia.

The sick sensation in Diana’s gut worsened. “The Oracle just said the spring at Therapne.”

“Could she have meant somewhere else?”

“Where?” said Diana. “There are no other monuments to Helen in Therapne. *‘Where Helen rests, the Warbringer may be purified.’*” She could feel her frustration rising. “This is where Helen was laid to rest. It was *her* shrine first, before it belonged to Menelaus.”

“There’s nothing here,” said Jason.

Theo turned in a slow circle. “We came all this way for nothing?”

Jason shook his head. “Alia, we have to get you out of here. You could still be in danger.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Her eyes met Diana’s. “I held up my end of the bargain. The sun will set soon.”

No. They’d barely looked for the spring. They hadn’t thought this through.

“We still have time,” said Diana. “We’ll find some other solution.”

“How much time do we have left? An hour? An hour and a half? There is no other solution. I won’t live knowing I could have stopped this.”

“Alia,” Jason said sharply. “I am not letting you kill yourself.”

“It isn’t up to you,” she said. Her voice was clear and strong and rang with conviction, the sound of steel against steel. “This is between me and Diana.”

Sister in battle. It wasn’t supposed to come to this. Diana had *known* in her heart they were meant to reach the spring together. What other lies had she told herself?

“You can’t be serious,” said Nim desperately. “What if this is all some kind of big mistake? For all we know this Warbringer thing is just—”

“Nim, after everything you’ve seen, everything we’ve been through, you know this is real.”

“We’re not going to kill you off as a precautionary measure,” said Theo. He gripped her shoulder, more serious and more frightened than Diana had ever seen him. “There has to be a way to fix this.”

But Alia shrugged him off. She took a step closer to Diana, and Diana had to will herself not to move away from her.

Your cause is mine.

She’d sworn to become a murderer, stain her hands with innocent blood. She’d given her oath, but Diana had never truly believed she’d be forced to fulfill it. She could not; she *would* not, and yet how was she to turn away from the conviction in Alia’s eyes? Alia had fought with everything she had to reach the spring, to reach the future Diana had promised might be hers.

“Sister in battle,” Diana said, ashamed of the tears that roughened her voice. “I have failed you.”

Diana stared at Jason, at his fingers digging into Alia's arm, at the soldiers fanned out around them. Their eyes were alert, scanning the area, but they kept returning to him—not as if assessing a target, but as if awaiting a command. They looked a bit like the boys Jason had spoken to at the gala—paler, sterner, but with that same smug ease. The Humvee rumbled to a stop half in and half out of the river, and only then did Diana realize that aside from the rhythmic whir of the helicopter blades, the air was still. Eris and the twins had gone. Had they retreated in defeat or because their victory was secure?

"What is this?" said Diana. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," Jason repeated. He sounded sincere. "I didn't really believe we'd get this close. I hoped I wouldn't have to intervene, that we could just let the clock run out and the sun set."

"Jason, man, what are you talking about?" said Theo. "You got us on the jet that brought us here."

"I know. It wasn't what I wanted. But you have to understand how hard it's been to keep Alia safe." He turned to his sister, his grip still secure on her upper arm. "First you run off to Istanbul and board a boat before I can send anyone to intercept you. When the *Thetis* went missing…I nearly lost my mind." He expelled a long breath, and his brows rose in that bemused look that had become so familiar. "But then you show up in New York, safe and sound, with an *Amazon* in tow."

Diana flinched. "You knew?"

"From the first moment we tangled in that hotel hallway. Did you really think you could pretend to be an ordinary mortal, Diana? There's nothing ordinary about you."

Anger unfurled inside her. That was why he hadn't asked about where she came from or what she was. Not out of respect, but because he already knew.

"What better bodyguard could I dream of for my sister?" Jason said. "An immortal warrior willing to stop at nothing to keep Alia alive."

"So we could reach the spring," Alia said, her dark eyes dazed and lost, as if she was waiting to be told this was all a joke.

"The *spring*." Jason said the word as if he wanted to rinse its sound from his mouth. "You two were set on trying to reach it, so why fight you? We'd go to Greece. I'd let you chase your tails, and all the while Diana would be using her strength and skill to protect the Warbringer."

Diana's hand inched toward her lasso, and Jason held up a scolding finger. "Easy now. There are snipers on the ridge. You might survive a bullet to the brain, but I doubt Nim or Theo will."

Alia winced. "Jason, have you lost your damn mind?"

"I'm just being cautious," he said softly. "The way I always have."

Nim planted her hands on her hips. "But you helped us! You could have flown us anywhere on that jet and—"

“My team was waiting for us on the ground in Araxos, but our enemies had other plans. After the crash, there were too many hostiles in the area. If I’d called in my forces, they might have led Alia’s pursuers straight to us. So I had them track us and follow at a safe distance.”

“The tracker for the parachute packs,” said Theo suddenly. “It wasn’t just receiving signals. It was transmitting, too.”

Jason lifted a brow. “I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out before now.”

Nim pointed her finger at Jason. “That’s why you didn’t want Theo to use his phone to start the car. You weren’t afraid of us being found. You were trying to slow us down.” Her eyes widened. “Oh God…That first day driving, you were handing me soda.”

Diana remembered Jason digging through the medical kit on the jet, pocketing pills. “You drugged her?” she asked incredulously. Could he have done such a thing to a girl he’d known his whole life? Who was this boy standing before her? This boy she’d whispered secrets to in the dark?

“I’m not proud of it,” he said, and he *sounded* ashamed. “But I had to do something. You were all so determined.”

“To stop a war!” shouted Alia, her voice fraying.

“Humans aren’t made for peace,” said Jason. “We’ve proven it again and again. Give us the chance and we’ll find something to fight over. Territory. Religion. Love. It’s our natural state. Ask Diana why her people turned their backs on us. They know what humans are.”

“Diana?” Alia asked.

Diana wasn’t sure what to say. She had been taught her whole life that mortals hungered for war, that they couldn’t resist the urge to destroy one another, that there was no point in trying to stem the tide of bloodshed.

As if he could read her mind, Jason said, “Don’t look to her for answers. Her people don’t care about us. And why should they? Look what we’ve become. Cowards and weaklings playing with weapons like they’re toys.”

“Weaklings,” Alia repeated. “Every generation weaker than the last….” She reared back as realization struck. “Our parents’ work. You didn’t continue it.”

“I did. Our father’s work.”

“What does Dad have to do with any of this?” Alia asked desperately.

“The files,” said Diana, remembering the missing pages, the blacked-out passages. “You redacted the text.”

“Dad saw the potential for what our blood could do, what it might mean for the world, before Mom interfered.”

“You mean before she talked sense into him?” Alia shot back.

Jason gave her arm a slight shake. “Vaccines. Gene therapy. Supercures. *That’s* what they ended up using our bloodline for. The blood of heroes like Ajax and Achilles. To prolong the lives of those who had no right to their strength.”

What had Jason said on that winding road through the cliffs? *It’s just biology. I’m not saying it’s good or bad.*

Alia tried to pull away from him, and Diana stepped forward. A bullet struck the water by Theo's feet.

"Shit!" shouted Theo, backing up and nearly falling. Nim shrieked.

"Jason," pleaded Alia, "call them off!"

"Behind me," commanded Diana, spreading her arms wide, eyes scanning the road above and the ridge of the ruins beyond it for snipers.

They stood in strange formation: Jason and Alia on the sandy riverbank, Diana with Nim and Theo crowded against her in the shallows—as if she could protect them when they were surrounded by men on all sides.

Theo held his hands up. "Jason," he said, voice reasonable. "Think about what you're saying. Who are you to decide who's weak and who's strong?"

“Stay behind me,” Diana commanded Nim and Theo, trying to keep her eyes on Alia and on the Humvee. There was a loud clatter as the vehicle seemed to rock on its mighty wheels, and the soldiers stepped forward, one with his gun raised to offer cover, the other with a long metal stick attached to some kind of collar. He threw open the rear doors. For a moment they were caught in shadow, and then they were backing into the sun, calling orders to the other soldiers as they dragged a huge shape from the depths of the Humvee.

“I call her Pinon,” said Jason. “The Drinker.” She had the head and torso of a woman, her breasts bare, her arms muscled, her red hair a ropy tangle. But her lower half was the segmented body of a glossy black scorpion, and a massive tail curled grotesquely behind her. “Part warrior, part arachnid, part parasite. She can drain an opponent’s blood in a matter of minutes, but she won’t digest it. Not until she needs it. Or in this case, I do.”

One of the soldiers used a hook to throw something at Pinon—a T-shirt emblazoned with “I NY.” *Enjoy the best, prepare for the worst.* He’d been planning this from the start. Pinon caught the shirt in one fist, breathed deeply of the scent, and cast it aside. Her vibrant green gaze fastened on Diana.

Jason signaled to a soldier, who tossed a sword at Theo’s feet in the shallows.

“Seems like a fair fight,” said Nim bitterly.

“Jason,” Alia pleaded. “Don’t do this.”

“You’ll grow stronger without these crutches to lean on, Al.”

“Jason—”

“Drain the Amazon,” he ordered. “Kill the others.”

His guards fell into formation, dragging Alia up the hill as she began to scream.

“Alia!” Diana cried, but Pinon skittered forward to block her path. The creature’s movements made her skin crawl. There was something unnatural in the creeping of her legs, the slither of that segmented body, but worse were her intelligent eyes.

“Find cover!” she yelled at Theo and Nim as she took her lasso in hand. But the remaining soldiers had fanned out in a half circle, cutting off their retreat and forming a kind of arena in the shallow waters of the river. They carried no guns, only swords and shields at the ready. Apparently, this was the kind of clean fight Jason thought the world needed.

Nim knelt to pick up the sword, but it looked almost as heavy as she was, and Theo took it from her, holding it awkwardly out before him, his narrow shoulders bunching with effort.

They crowded together, back to back, and edged deeper into the water, the river cold around Diana’s sandaled feet as she herded them toward a cluster of boulders that might provide cover. Pinon followed, her tail curling and uncurling behind her.

“On a scale of one to ‘we’re definitely going to die,’ where would you put this?”

“Shut up, Theo,” murmured Nim, her voice breathless with fear.

But they did not cower, did not weep. These people Jason discarded with such contempt, whom he could sentence to death with a few brief words, stood at her back, stubborn and courageous as they had always been.

Neutralize Pinon. Deal with the soldiers. *Find a way,* she told herself. *Find a way to keep them safe.*

Diana feinted left, and her hand shot out, hurtling the lasso at Pinon’s tail in a bright lash. Too slow. The creature dodged in a blur of speed, far faster than her leisurely approach had indicated. Pinon reared up, forelegs waving hideously. She ducked her chin, her smile small and close-lipped, almost coy. She launched herself forward.

“Get down!” Diana shouted, hoping Theo and Nim would comply. She swept the lasso out, hooked it over a boulder, snapped it tight, and swung the rock. Pinon tried to dart away, but the boulder caught the edge of her shoulder, knocking her backward with bone-shattering force.

The monster gave a high, mewling shriek, her tail lashing the air as she turned back to Diana. There was that intelligence again, a gaze that promised punishment.

“Get ready to run,” Diana instructed.

“Born ready,” said Theo.

Diana yanked the boulder back to her, swung it once to build momentum, then sent it barreling into two of the soldiers. She hooked it back, attacked with it again, the rock shooting forward like a missile, knocking two more of the men to the ground.

“Go!” she shouted. Nim and Theo scrambled to their feet, but the soldiers closed ranks quickly, blocking their escape and drawing the circle tighter.

Pinon was creeping forward, flexing her injured shoulder, tail twitching. Diana whipped the boulder toward her, and the creature slithered back onto the sand.

Diana tightened her grip on the rope and swung the boulder wide, launching it at the soldiers again, trying to make a way out. Two fell easily, but the next soldier braced himself and blocked the impact with his forearms. A chunk of the boulder flew free.

Heroes’ blood.

Alia thrashed in the arms of the soldiers dragging her along the road, past a line of armored trucks and Humvees.

"Jason, stop this," she pleaded. "You can't let them die. Not Nim, not Theo. They're no threat to you. You can let Diana go home. Please. Jason—" She didn't even know what she was saying anymore; it was just a series of entreaties, one more desperate than the last. She knew she was crying. Her voice was raw. Her arms ached where Jason's soldiers had hold of her. Their fingers felt unnaturally strong, like steel prongs.

When they reached the back of one of the trucks, a soldier passed Jason a canteen full of water. He drank deeply, but when he offered it to her, she slapped it from his hands. The soldiers yanked her arms back tighter, and she snarled at them, kicking out with her legs as they lifted her off the ground. Jason sighed.

"Alia!" he barked. He set his hands on her shoulders. "Alia," he said more gently. "*Stop*. You're going to hurt yourself."

A sound that was half sob, half laugh ripped free of her throat. She stared at him. Her brother. Her protector. Her friend. His face so like hers that it was almost like looking into a mirror. "Jason," she said quietly. "Please. I am begging you. Help them."

He shook his head, and she saw true sorrow in his eyes. "I can't, Al. A war is coming. People like Nim and Theo won't survive it. This is a kindness."

"Stop talking that way."

"I'm sorry. This is how it has to be."

The emotion that rose in her felt like something rupturing down her center, cracking her in two. Jason, who had read to her, who had let her cry herself to sleep curled into his side, who had walked to school with her every day for months because she'd been afraid to ride in a car after the accident. He couldn't be doing this thing, this horrible thing.

"No, it doesn't," she said. Jason was the reasonable one, the steady one. She had to make him understand. "It doesn't. We can undo this. We can make it right."

"Alia, I know you don't see it, but I know what's right for both of us." He glanced over his shoulder. "And I'm afraid it's too late."

Alia followed his gaze and retched, her mind rejecting the horror before her. Pinon, Jason had called her, the Drinker. She was emerging from the trees, being herded toward the open back of a Humvee. But she didn't look as she had when his men had unleashed her by the river. Her body was bloated, the skin gray and distended; her swollen tail dragged on the ground behind her. *Kill the others. Drain the Amazon.*

Diana was dead. She was dead, and this thing was full of her blood.

"Have her disgorge and bring me the ampoules," Jason commanded. "I want to start processing the data on the way to base."

Two of the soldiers dragged Pinon into the back of the Humvee. Through its doors, she could see part of it had been converted to cages.

Another of Jason's men said, "Will you be taking the helicopter to base, sir?"

Sir.

"No, I want the Seahawk keeping an eye on the surrounding territory and making sure we didn't draw any unwanted attention. We're safer on the ground, and we don't have much time until the sun goes down. Set a fire once we're a few miles out and make sure the bodies burn."

How could he say these things? "You're talking about burning our friends."

"I'm doing what has to be done."

"I will never forgive you, Jason. Never."

Jason's gaze was sad, but it didn't falter. "You will, Alia. Because you'll have no one else. You are the Warbringer, and when the sun sets, you will fulfill your destiny and pave the way for me to fulfill mine. One day, you'll learn to forgive me. But if you don't, I'll find a way to live with that. It's the price I'm willing to pay for a world transformed. That's what heroes do."

Now she did laugh, an ugly sound of serrated edges. "You *were* my hero. The wise one. The responsible one. But you're the kind of guy Mom and Dad would have hated."

"Dad would have understood."

"This is really about him, isn't it?" Alia said as the pieces shifted into place. "All that talk about generals and warfare, but this is about Dad. This is because you're so desperate to be a Keralis instead of a Mayeux."

"Be careful. Be cautious," he sneered, mocking their mother's warnings. "Is that how you want to live? Playing by their rules instead of making our own?"

"You *are* playing by their rules—choosing the strong over the weak, turning against the people who always had your back."

"*These* are my people," he said, spreading his hands wide. "Heroes. Winners."

Alia shook her head. "You think you're going to save the world and everyone's going to finally thank you for it? You think all your new gun-toting friends are going to take your side when the battle is over? This isn't going to change anything."

"You don't see it, Alia, but eventually you will."

"Tell yourself what you want. You're not a hero. You're a little boy playing war."

"That's enough."

"I'll let you know when it's enough," she snapped.

His eyes narrowed. "You are a child, Alia. You've had the luxury of being a child because I kept the watch, because I made the hard choices. I can't protect you forever."

The pain inside her was a living thing, a wounded animal that strained at its leash.

"What's going to happen to me, Jason? Is someone going to betray everything I believe in and murder my friends? Is that what you're going to protect me from?"

"Stop being a brat."

She spat in his face.

Jason recoiled. He wiped his face clean with the hem of his shirt. For a moment he was just a boy, her brother, in a dirty T-shirt and jeans. Then he spoke, and the illusion shattered.

"Get her in the car," he said to two soldiers standing at attention nearby. "But be cautious. You aren't immune to her power the way I am. I don't want you fighting among yourselves. We'll change drivers as we travel."

The soldiers hauled her toward the backseat of one of the Humvees, but they paused when Jason said, "Alia, the world's about to become a very ugly place. Everyone will need allies. You may want to think about how alone you are."

He was scolding her, like a kid being sent to bed without supper. She loved her brother, maybe she even understood the hurt that drove him, but she would never forgive what he had done.

When she spoke again, she didn't recognize her own voice. It was a low, thrumming thing, the rage within her burning like a crucible, making it something new.

Diana could see the silver waters of the Eurotas, her own body, facedown in the river, limbs sprawled at graceless angles, drained of blood and white as bone. She made the shape of a shattered star. Nim lay a few yards away, and there was Theo, his arm hooked around a rock, as if he'd been trying to hold on to it, fingers fluttering in the current.

She watched Pinon make her slow progress to the road, her movements sluggish, her blood-bloated tail dragging through the brush as she returned to her master. As if from a great distance, she could hear the whir of helicopter blades, and Alia shouting. She was sorry she could not go to her friend, but the emotion was a faraway thing, a thought that came and went like a memory of sorrow. Diana felt nothing. Without her body, there was nothing to hold to, nothing to keep her tied to the earth.

So this was how it ended. This was death.

Yes, Daughter of Earth, this is death. And rebirth.

Diana saw her then: the Oracle, crouched by the great gray trunk of the plane tree, leaning over the waters of the spring and stirring them with one long finger, as if it were her scrying pool back on Themyscira. Was she real or just a dying vision?

I am as real as anything, said the Oracle. Her hood slid back, revealing piercing gray eyes, a full mouth, her features framed by a golden helm. Diana had seen the Oracle in this guise when she'd first visited her, but she hadn't realized she was looking into the face of a god.

Athena.

See me now as I truly am, Daughter. See us.

The light from the water shifted, and Athena's face was gone. She was Aphrodite with her gleaming curls; Hera in her jeweled glory; Artemis, glowing bright as the moon; veiled Hestia, who burned like an ember; Demeter in her crown of wheat; and then Athena once more. She was too beautiful. Diana wished she had eyes so she could look away.

We made Themyscira for the Amazons that they would have sanctuary, and in the guise of the Oracle, we watch over our daughters still.

It is time to return home, Diana, and take your true place among your sisters. You fought bravely for the innocent. You died with honor. And in your final moments, you cried out to me.

The Oracle rose, and Diana saw her shape shift—a warrior, a wife, a woman seated at a loom, an archer with arrow drawn.

Come, Daughter of Earth, and be reborn as your sisters once were, with all the strength that is your due. A war is coming, and you must help your people to prepare. You have earned your place among the battle-born at last.

Battle-born. Diana had dreamed of those words, longed for them. *I am an Amazon.*

Could she truly return to Themyscira? Fight side by side with her sisters in the war to come? The Council would never allow it. She'd violated the island's most fundamental laws.

They will never know, said the Oracle. *It will be as if you never left. Come, Diana. Come home.*

Home. The images were bright in her mind. The trumpet flowers climbing the window outside of her bedroom. The palace kitchens bustling with life. The woods with their vast trees, where she and Maeve had spent long hours exploring. The northern shore with its cliffs and secret coves. The cliffs she knew better than anyone, where she'd first heard Alia's cry for help.

Alia. To whom she'd sworn an oath. *As I breathe, your enemies will know no sanctuary. While I live, your cause is mine.* That vow was unbreakable, as binding as the golden lasso.

Diana thought of Ben, who had piloted the jet with such calm assurance, facing down assailants he knew were better armed; of Alia's parents, who had tried to make a better world. She thought of her pinky twined with Nim's; of Theo picking up a sword, though he had no idea how to wield it. The Amazons were her people, but these had become her people, too. She had to find a way to protect them.

These people, these mortals—fragile, foolish, brave beyond all common sense—deserved a chance at peace. It was not too late. The sun had not yet set.

Daughter, said Athena, *we see your good heart. But this cannot be.*

Please, Diana begged. *Let me remain.*

No, said the goddess, and her voice was stern.

But from the first moment she'd met Alia, Diana had refused to do as she was told. Why start now?

Give me another chance, she pleaded. What was she asking? What price would the gods demand? *Give Theo and Nim another chance.*

This is not possible. Their moment is past.

You are goddesses, Diana said, taking her courage in hand. *You decide what's possible.*

You bargain for the lives of mortals? A different voice this time, clear as a horn calling the hunt. *Why?*

They are my soldiers, said Diana. *I can't win this battle alone.*

And these are the warriors you choose? that clear, cold voice asked, her amusement rippling like moonlight.

Another voice spoke, sweet as a lyre. *If the girl wishes to make a foolish choice, she would not be the first.*

Then if we are to bargain, said another, *let us name our terms. What do you have to offer, Daughter of Earth?*

Nothing. She had nothing with which to barter for her friends' lives. No trinkets or vows to offer, no worthy sacrifice. But that wasn't quite true, was it? She had the gift she'd just been given. She could risk her own life, her own future.

Think, Daughter, said the Oracle, once more the golden-helmed general. *Think what you will be giving up for the sake of these mortals, these brief, impossible creatures.*

But Diana didn't need to think anymore.

I offer my life as an Amazon. If I fail to stop this war, if I die at Jason's hand, I relinquish my right to return to the island.

You would go to your true death? said the Oracle.

Yes.

A chorus rose: a thousand languages, the voices of a thousand goddesses, all the deities who had entrusted their daughters to the sanctuary of Themyscira, all who knew what war would bring.

Then, abruptly, the Oracle went silent. The goddesses waged their arguments in private, and all Diana could do was wait. An age passed. A bare second.

Athena spoke, and Diana heard both pride and caution in her voice. *We will answer your entreaties. Your compatriots will have their chance and so will you. Seek victory, and should you find it, return to your sisters as a true Amazon. But heed us, Daughter of Earth—you have bartered the last of your chances.*

Diana felt a tremor of fear at these words. The gods did not deal in favors. There was always a price.

Here are the terms of our bargain: Should you die in the World of Man a second time, you will pass on to the Underworld as mortals do. You will never see Themyscira's shores, or your mother or your sisters again. Athena paused. *Do you understand, Diana? Your life will end. There can be no backward step. We will not intercede on your behalf. Speak not our names to plead for mercy.*

Diana thought of exiled Nessa standing on the shore, stripped of her armor, as the earth shook and the winds howled. She remembered the poet's words: *What can we say of her suffering, except that it was brief?*

Diana had made her choice with that first leap from a high cliff, with that first plunge into the sea. Her mother and her sisters had chosen to turn their backs on the World of Man, to build a new world with peace at its heart. *Their work is done,* thought Diana. *But mine is just beginning.*

This is my fight, she told the Oracle. *Let me claim it.*

A sound like thunder rent the air with a *crack.*

Diana gasped for breath—the roar of the storm was the pounding of her heart, echoing in her ears as her body filled with blood, her lungs with air. Her eyes flew open. She saw gray water, reeds. She inhaled, and water flooded her nostrils. She remembered her arms, her legs, forced herself to turn over and sit up, coughing.

The air around her seemed to snap with electricity.

Demeter lifted her hand, and the reeds along the riverbank grew taller, sheltering them from view.

Hera knelt beside Nim. The goddess cradled her head in her lap, straightening the angle of Nim's neck as Aphrodite dipped a shell into the river and sprinkled its contents over Nim's limp form. Nim's chest began to rise. She blinked once, twice, sat up in shock, water streaming from her hair, looking around frantically, but the goddesses were gone.

Over Theo's wound, Hestia's fingers dripped fire, and as the flames touched the cleft the sword had made in his side, the flesh knit together, smooth and unscarred. Artemis drew an arrow from her quiver, ghostly and glowing as if forged of moonlight. She drove it into Theo's chest, and he twitched, gasping as his heart began to beat once more. His eyes flew open, and he scrambled backward on his hands, reaching for a weapon, seeking his attackers.

"Diana? What the hell just happened?" said Nim. "Where's Alia? Where's that—that thing?"

There was no sign of the goddesses or the Oracle, but Diana heard Athena's words ringing in her ears: *Speak not our names to plead for mercy*.

There were men headed down the hillside; they had cans of gasoline in their hands.

Theo touched the place where his wound had been. "Did I die? Oh shit, am I a zombie?"

"There's no time to explain," said Diana. "Jason has Alia."

Theo's face went grim. "Then let's go get her."

Diana glanced at the horizon. "And we have less than thirty minutes until the sun sets."

Nim nodded. "Then let's get her *quickly*."

She'd chosen her soldiers. It was time to go to war.

They crept into the bushes, skirting the men with the gasoline cans who had made it down to the banks of the river and were discovering there were no bodies to be found.

"What the hell?" one of them said. "I saw Pinon finish the Amazon, and Rutkoski took care of the skinny guy."

"I broke that Indian kid's neck myself," said another.

"Asshole," muttered Nim.

"So where are they?"

"Maybe the river carried them downstream?"

They set off, boots splashing through the shallows.

"Come on," said Diana. "We won't have long until they report back to Jason."

At the edge of the blacktop, they paused. Jason's vehicles had blocked off the road, and she wondered if his forces had set up a perimeter to stop ordinary traffic. She could see men milling around two Humvees at the head of the caravan. Three armored trucks clustered closer to their hiding place, along with a third Humvee. This was the one that carried Pinon. Diana could tell from the heavy bolts that had been added to the rear doors, but she was relieved to see no sign of the creature. Hopefully, she was securely locked up and sleeping off her feast inside the vehicle. The helicopter had taken to the air and was making a wide circle over the valley.

A group of soldiers was piling into one of the armored trucks. Through the open doors of another, she could see a mini armory of weapons and what looked like a mobile laboratory. Jason was speaking to a man seated in front of a computer, test tubes full of blood—her blood—parceled out for him to play with. The sick shame of betrayal pooled in her gut. He'd lied to her, taken her trust, and stolen the very life from her body.

"How can he look so damn calm?" Theo said. Beneath his anger, Diana heard all the hurt and bewilderment of the moment Jason had turned on them.

"It's worse than that," said Nim, nothing but disgust in her voice. "He looks *satisfied*."

She was right. The rigid tension had gone from Jason. He'd changed into a clean shirt and a combat jacket, and he wore them like cloth of gold. He looked like a king at the moment of his ascension.

Diana curled her hand into a fist. He wasn't a king; he was a thief. And he'd taken enough from all of them.

"Theo," she said, "if you had access to one of those computers, could you find a way to, I don't know—"

"Infiltrate Jason's network and decimate his data stores, corrupting every bit of information he's gathered and rendering his research worthless?"

"Um, yes, that."

"Sure."

“That easy?” said Nim.

Theo shrugged. “I helped build Jason’s networks and firewalls.”

Nim whistled. “No wonder he wanted you dead.”

Jason jumped down from the truck and headed for the front of the caravan, pausing beside the second Humvee.

“Alia will be in there,” Diana said. “They’ll take second position on the drive in case of ambush. I can get to her.”

“You sure?” said Theo. “Those are a lot of soldiers all juiced up on hero blood.”

“I can get to her,” Diana repeated, hoping that was true. She would have only one chance at this. “But we need to get you to the lab truck. Jason said he had snipers in place, and I doubt he’ll have them stand down until the caravan is in motion.”

Nim pointed to a spot near the crest of the Menelaion, then left and right at the lower ridges. “They’ll be there,” she said.

“What do you know about snipers?” asked Theo.

“Nothing, but I know plenty about sight lines. Those are the three spots that will give them direct views of the caravan and anyone approaching from either side of the road.”

“That’s remarkable,” said Diana. “Can you pick out a path to follow that will get us to the lab truck without drawing their fire?”

Nim cocked her head. “I can get us there, but not without the guys in Pinon’s Humvee seeing us.”

“Then that’s our first stop,” said Diana. “Nim, take the lead. Let’s move.”

They dropped into a crouch and crept along the side of the road, following Nim’s directions, using the brush and trees as cover. Nim’s zigs and zags as they approached the vehicles seemed counterintuitive to Diana, but she could admit she didn’t have Nim’s particular gift for the visual. They emerged from the brush, wriggled directly under one of the armored trucks, and then crawled along its opposite flank. From there, they slid into a wide pocket of shadow by the driver’s side of the Humvee.

“Stay close,” she said, and yanked open the driver’s door.

Before the stunned soldier could say a word, she’d pulled him from the vehicle and slammed him against the Humvee’s side. He dropped to the pavement.

“Hey!” said the soldier in the passenger’s seat, his hand on his radio. She slid into the car, seized the scruff of his shirt, and cracked his head against the dashboard. He slumped forward.

Diana looked behind her. The rear of the Humvee held two large cages. Pinon lay in one, curled on her side and snoring.

She picked up the handheld radio and slipped back out of the Humvee. Nim and Theo were rolling the driver’s unconscious body beneath the vehicle.

“Nim,” said Diana. “Get us to the lab truck.”

In a few quick steps, they were there. Diana threw the back doors open and leapt inside.

The man at the computer station scrambled away, fumbling for the gun at his hip.

Diana yanked it from its holster and held it easily out of his reach.

He raised his hands. “Please. I’m a scientist.”

“I’m not going to hurt you.” She saw his hand creeping toward a yellow panic switch and brought the butt of the pistol down on his head. “Much.”

She waved Theo and Nim inside and shut the doors behind them.

“Keep an eye on him,” she said. “If anyone realizes you’re here—”

Nim snatched a semiautomatic rifle from the wall. “We’ll be ready.”

Theo was already bent over the computer, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

A machine was whirring at the workstation, row after row of glass test tubes filling with dark red blood, then shifting left so another row could be filled.

“Oh hell,” said Nim. “Is that your blood?”

Diana narrowed her eyes. She scanned the mini armory in the truck and pointed to a row of incendiary grenades. “When Theo is done, I want you to get clear, then blow this truck and the vehicle with Pinon in it. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” said Nim.

Her answer was a little too quick and a little too confident for Diana’s liking. “Without blowing yourselves up?”

“Possibly,” said Theo.

The radio crackled. “We are ready to move out. Collins, remain in position until the site has been cleared, over.” They stared at the black box. The voice sounded again. “Collins, do you copy?”

Theo snatched up the radio, fumbling it clumsily, then pressed a button and said, “Copy that…pal.”

“See you back at base, over.”

Theo put the radio aside and returned to his work. Diana grabbed a short sword and a shield from the racks.

“I don’t understand,” said Nim. “All the swords and stuff. Are Jason’s soldiers really tough enough to go up against bullets and bombs?”

“He’s going to deploy EMPs,” said Theo. He pointed to the screen, where a long string of text scrolled by. Diana’s confusion must have shown, because he continued. “An electromagnetic pulse. It’s not much different from lightning, just a lot bigger. It will disable all major weapons systems. No nukes, no missiles, no access to weapons stockpiles.”

“A fair fight,” murmured Diana. *I wanted to remake the world.*

“Sure,” said Theo. “If you’ve been taking your hero-blood vitamins. The Keralis Foundation has footholds all over the world. He’s going to throw us back to the Stone Age.”

“The Bronze Age,” corrected Nim.

“Was dying once today not enough for you?” said Theo.

Diana touched each of them on the shoulder, hoping they could get along well enough to manage this task.

“Stay quiet and stay safe,” she whispered, heading for the doors. “And lock up behind me.”

“Diana,” said Nim. “Kick Jason’s ass.”

She frowned, confused. “Specifically his ass?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Without looking up from the keys, Theo said, “New York tradition.”

Diana nodded and cracked the doors. She edged outside. The last of the day’s sunlight cast long shadows across the road. She’d hoped to be able to sneak up on Jason’s vehicle, but there was no time for stealth. The caravan was already moving.

Diana broke into a run. Instantly, she heard gunfire. She kept her shield up, hearing bullets ping against the metal. She sprinted ahead, slipping alongside the last truck in the caravan, keeping pace with it and using it for cover. She heard voices shouting and saw the lead cars put on speed as the truck beside her screeched to a halt.

She couldn’t afford to wait to see what emerged from it. She raced ahead and dove for the back of the Humvee, seizing the base of its metal bumper, using one hand to keep her shield above her, and the other to lift the vehicle’s back end off the ground.

The Humvee’s front wheels spun as it tried to surge forward. Diana gave a grunt of effort and planted her feet. A bullet struck her left thigh; another struck her calf, the pain coming in bright shocks that jolted through her body. She glanced behind her and saw soldiers pouring out of the other truck, racing toward her with guns drawn. They were far enough away that their weapons weren’t doing much damage, but she couldn’t maintain this position.

Diana sucked in a breath and flung her shield at them in a sweeping arc. She let go of the Humvee. It roared forward on a burst of speed. With a running leap, she sprang onto its back, charging up and over the roof. Gunfire exploded around her, the bullets striking her body in a painful hail. She ignored them and launched herself off the Humvee’s hood, directly into its path.

She rolled into a somersault, came up standing, and barely had time to plant her feet and turn, hands held out before her. The Humvee barreled into her, driving her backward, her sandals sliding over the pavement. The force of the impact quaked up her palms, and she gritted her teeth, bracing her shoulders, as the Humvee’s engine roared.

She heard footfalls, soldiers running toward her. How many? Ten? Twenty? More? How fast were they? How strong? Could she fight them all?

Diana looked to the west. The sun had turned a fiery red as it drew closer to the hills. How long did she have until it set completely? How long until darkness fell and their last chance vanished?

When a voice came over the radio declaring, “Sir, we have an incoming hostile,” Jason didn’t seem remotely concerned.

“Local law or big guns?”

“Uh, neither, sir. It’s that girl.”

Alia sat up straighter, the plastic zip ties around her wrists digging into her flesh.

“Girl?” Jason said, craning his neck as gunfire exploded behind them.

Alia was afraid to look, afraid to hope, but she made herself turn.

Diana, sprinting through a torrent of bullets, her shield raised above her head. She leapt forward and seized the rear bumper of the Humvee.

“That isn’t *possible,*” Jason said, his brow lowered as if he was trying to solve a particularly difficult equation. “Pinon drained her. No one can survive that.”

Men were descending on Diana, drawing closer, the gunfire growing louder. She hurled her shield at them and released the Humvee, but a moment later, Alia heard footsteps on the roof, and in the next second, Diana was standing in the Humvee’s path.

“Take her down,” said Jason.

The driver gunned the engine, and Alia screamed.

They struck Diana head-on, the impact throwing Alia forward against her seat belt. But Diana hadn’t moved. She was planted in the road, her lips drawn back over her teeth, her hands braced against the Humvee’s crossbar.

“My God,” Jason said, peering through the windshield, admiration in his voice. “Look at her.”

He didn’t sound scared. Alia wanted him to sound scared.

“Sir?” said the driver, unsure of himself.

“I want the prota guard. Swords and shields, no guns. Oh, and tell them to try and keep her alive if they can.”

How could he talk this way? As if this was a game—no, an experiment—and he couldn’t wait to record the outcome.

The soldier communicated the order over the radio, and in seconds Alia saw a wave of men flanking Diana as the Humvee’s wheels whirred.

“These are my finest soldiers,” Jason said. “They’ve been blessed with the strength of the greatest heroes to ever walk this earth, but they’ve never faced a challenge like Diana.”

Alia glared at him. “They’re no match for her.”

“Maybe not,” Jason acknowledged. “But they’ll make quite a mess of her while we wait for the sun to set.”

Fresh fury spiked through her. She pulled futilely at her cuffed hands. Diana was here, back from the dead, and Alia could do nothing to help her. She wanted to scream. All of this power inside her, an apocalypse waiting to be born, and what use was it to her?

“I wish we could stay to watch her fight,” Jason said as his prota guard advanced with swords and spears and…nets.

“Why do they have nets, Jason?” she asked, though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“I was shortsighted before. Okay,” he admitted with a small, painfully Jason shrug, “I was overeager. I shouldn’t have had Pinon drain her dry. Alive, she’ll provide me with a permanent supply of genetic material to work from.”

Something dark tore lose in Alia. Jason might not be right about their parents, but he wasn’t totally wrong, either. Her whole life, she’d been told to be careful, to keep her voice low, to make sure she only drew the right kind of attention. Stay calm. Don’t give them a reason. Don’t ever give them a reason. But she’d had a right to her anger then, and she had a right to it now. And what had being careful gotten her, anyway? There had to be justice for Theo, for Nim, for all the pain Jason had caused. *Careful* wasn’t going to get it. *Nemesis. Goddess of retribution.*

She heard the beat of wings and recoiled, thinking of Eris, but this sound came from within her, the rustle of something that had slept for too long. *Haptandra. The hand of war.* What if she were the one to reach for this power?

I am done being careful. I am done being quiet. Let them see me angry. Let them hear me wail at the top of my lungs. The sleeping thing stretched its wings, black and glossy, lit by dark fire. It rose, a dagger in its hand.

Nemesis. What if this power wasn’t only a curse but a gift, something unwieldy and dangerous, passed from a goddess to her daughter, and on and on, something that longed to be used? What if it could be a weapon in Alia’s hand?

She closed her eyes and reached toward that dark, winged thing. She grabbed hold, fastening it to her, so that she was only anger now. Alia could almost feel the shift of wings between her own shoulder blades—and there was no fear, only a vibrant surety. *This is mine. This is my right.* She nudged at the power inside her and felt it take flight.

The soldier in the passenger seat lifted his radio and smashed it into the driver’s head. Jason flinched back as the driver turned on his attacker and they began to grapple in the front seat.

“Scholes!” Jason shouted as the driver took his foot off the pedal and the Humvee decelerated. “Chihara! What the hell are you doing?”

Alia opened her eyes, saw the ring of soldiers. She reached toward her power, and this time she *shoved.*

Suddenly, the soldiers outside were screaming, shouting, their swords clanging as they turned on one another.

“Damn it,” said Jason. “This must be because we’re so close to sunset.”

“Yeah,” said Alia. “That must be it.”

“Do—” Jason began, then shouted as the Humvee tilted forward and the front of the vehicle hit the road with a loud metallic clang. “What the—”

“I think she took the front tires off.” The Humvee’s rear sank with a sudden *thunk*. “And those would be the back tires.”

“Where is she?” he said, turning in his seat.

“She’s coming for you.” Alia looked through the windows and smiled at the havoc she had made. It was only the beginning. “*We’re* coming for you.”

“Don’t look so pleased, Alia,” Jason said, and she could see only frustration in him, no terror, no worry. If anything, he looked almost eager as he drew a long sword from the Humvee’s main compartment. “This fight is just starting.”

He threw the door open, blade gleaming in his hand.

Diana cast the last of the tires away in time to see Jason crawl from the box that had been the Humvee and launch himself to his feet. He was armed with a sword and paused only to snatch a shield from the inert arm of one of his fallen men.

There was no time to survey the chaos around her, to worry if, back in the lab truck, Theo and Nim would succumb to this battle madness, too.

The soldier closest to Diana had knocked his compatriot to the ground and was slamming his shield against his opponent's face. Diana seized it on the upswing and cracked it once across the soldier's head. He dropped forward, cheek to cheek with his comrade.

She faced Jason now. They were ringed by fighting men. The other truck had driven off the road.

Diana tested the weight of the sword in her hand. It was fairly short, but its shape would make it good for both cutting and thrusting. Though the steel was of average quality, the blade seemed sharp enough.

"Your men aren't coming to your rescue," she said.

Jason rolled his shoulders. "I don't need a rescue."

"You already lost to me once on the way up the mountain."

"Let's say I let you believe what you wanted to believe."

Diana shook her head, realizing he'd feigned his fatigue on that starlit peak. "You lie as easily as you breathe. Always you held back. Well then," she said, "let's see what your best looks like against an Amazon."

They circled each other slowly. But Jason had no reason to wait to assess her strengths. He'd been doing that for days. He lunged.

Their swords met, clashed, the sound of steel against steel ringing off the hillside. Diana felt the force of the blow all the way up her arm. He was strong and knew how to use his weight.

They drew apart, blades sparking. He attacked, and Diana parried, spinning left, keeping her shield up as he made a fresh jab at her ribs. *Strong,* she noted, *but also used to being the strongest player on the field.* He slammed his shield into hers, expecting her to fall back. Instead, she shoved, sending him flying.

He crashed into the side of one of the trucks but was on his feet in the blink of an eye. He shook off the pain of the impact and smiled. "The soldiers I am going to build from your blood."

Not if Theo can help it, she thought as Jason rushed at her, his sword glinting like a flash of lightning in a bank of clouds. He moved in a flurry, swiping and thrusting, driving her backward. She shifted her weight, returning each blow. It was startling, strange. How many hours had she spent preparing for such a moment? And yet this was nothing like the drills or sparring matches in the training rooms of the Armory. Because now her opponent was prepared to deal a killing blow.

"You're fast," she noted.

Jason smiled, and the dimple that had charmed her so easily appeared. “You’re not just fighting me,” he said, his breathing even. “You’re fighting the warriors who defeated the Amazons. Achilles, who bested Penthesilea. Telamon, who brought low Melanippe. Hercules, who defeated Hippolyta.”

She hated hearing her sisters’ names, her mother’s name on his lips.

Diana raised a brow. “A wise warrior learns from her mistakes.” She adjusted her stance. “And you’re forgetting who taught me to fight.”

She brought her sword down in a furious arc. Jason raised his shield to block the blow but stumbled. Diana kicked out with her right foot, driving her heel into his solar plexus and knocking the wind from his lungs.

This time he did not rise so quickly. She descended on him with every bit of skill she’d learned, the echo of her sisters’ teachings reverberating through her movements, the lessons they’d learned and passed down to her.

Jason returned the blows, but his movements had slowed. He was still feeling the force of her kick, struggling to catch his breath. She slashed and he pivoted right, avoiding the strike, but she’d never intended to make contact. She checked her attack, changing direction, and brought her blade down in a swipe against his shield arm. He hissed as blood bloomed along his skin. She took the opening and brought the hilt of her sword down swiftly on his shield, knocking it free of his hand. It hit the ground with a dull clang.

Diana changed her grip and swept her blade hard right, batting his sword away.

He scrambled backward, his left arm dripping blood. He looked less frightened than confused, as if he couldn’t quite fathom where his weapons had gone. “No,” he said. “This is all wrong. Achilles, Hercules, they won. In all the stories, they best the Amazons. They are the victors.”

“Those are the stories your poets tell, not mine. Surrender, Jason Keralis.”

Jason growled his frustration, circling left. “Did Menelaus surrender when Paris stole his bride? I know you aren’t willing to deal a killing strike.”

“You can’t win. Only my sisters can match me in fair combat.”

A fevered look came into his eyes. “Then put aside your weapons. Fight me hand to hand. Best me and take your victory.”

Would that end this? Give him the defeat in honest combat he sought? She doubted it. Diana shrugged, tossed her sword and shield far out of reach.

Jason sighed and shook his head. “So honest, so righteous.” His lips curved, the beginnings of a smile, sharp as a knife blade. “So easy to dupe. Only your sisters can match you?” He drew a syringe from his pocket. “Then you will fall to the might of the Amazons.”

She remembered what he’d said on the banks of the Eurotas. *I began building a serum from your DNA the first day we met*. Her cells, her strength.

“No!” Diana cried.

He jammed the needle into his thigh and depressed the plunger, then tossed the empty syringe aside. Jason straightened, cracked his neck. His grin widened. Diana took a step back.

“The sun sets,” said Jason, flexing his fingers as if testing the feel of his new strength. “An age of heroes begins. And I believe I promised you a beautiful death.”

He advanced and Diana retreated, eyeing him warily. “There’s nowhere to run now. I wonder,” he said, his hands forming fists, “how it will feel to be brought low by strength born of your own blood.”

He swung left. Diana dodged the blow. He came up hard right—a hook to her gut with tremendous force. Diana grunted as his fist landed. Jason released a *whoof* of air and drew back, startled.

He shook it off and lunged at her. She pivoted, intending to wrap her ankle around his and use his own momentum to bring him down. But he was faster now. He halted his motion, seized her shoulders, and twisted, hurling her to the ground.

He grunted as if he were the one who’d been thrown on his back, whirled as if expecting to find someone behind him.

Diana rocked backward and sprang to her feet.

Jason threw himself at her, unleashing a flurry of punches and driving elbows; she bobbed left, right, landed a punch to his gut. He drove the palm of his hand upward in a strike to her chin. Diana’s neck snapped back; the metallic tang of blood filled her mouth.

Jason reeled away, holding his hand to his jaw as if he’d been struck. He touched his fingers to his mouth, but there was no blood there. His eyes were wide and wild. “What is this?”

Diana licked the blood from her lip. Now she was the one to smile. “This is what it means to be an Amazon. My pain is theirs, and theirs is mine. Each wound you deal will be one you suffer yourself.”

“But it’s not just the—” Jason shook his head as if trying to clear it. He took a step toward her, stopped. “What is that *sound*?”

“Come, Jason, strike me. Grant me the beautiful death you promised. But with each blow, you will feel the agony of every Amazon fallen in battle. In each attack, you will hear the chorus of their screams.”

Jason clapped his hands to his ears. “Make it stop.”

“I can’t.”

He lurched forward, dropped to his knees. “Make it stop!” he screamed. “Don’t you hear it? Don’t you feel it?”

“Of course,” said Diana. “Every Amazon bears the suffering of her sisters, lives with it, and learns to endure it. It’s why we value mercy so highly.” It was what helped them remember that despite their greater strength, their speed, their skill, the promise of glory was nothing in the face of another’s anguish. Diana crouched down and took Jason’s chin in her fingers, forcing him to meet her gaze. “If you cannot bear our pain, you are not fit to carry our strength.”

“You meant to do this,” he hissed. “You tricked me.”

It was true. Jason knew she would not kill him, and she had known he would never surrender without the hero’s death he so longed for. “Let’s say I let you believe what you wanted to believe.”

“Kill me!” Jason yelled. “You can’t leave me like this!”

“You haven’t earned an honorable death—neither a beautiful one nor a quiet one. Live in shame instead, Jason Keralis, unmourned and unremembered.”

“You’ll remember me,” he panted, his face sheened with sweat. “I was your first kiss. I could have been your first everything. You’ll always know that.”

She looked deep into his eyes. “You were my first nothing, Jason. I am immortal, and you are a footnote. I will erase you from my history, and you will vanish, unremembered by this world.”

Jason gave a high, keening shriek, his entire body shuddering. He slumped over on his side, curling into himself like a child, and wrapped his arms over his head, rocking back and forth, his howls of rage becoming sobs.

She heard a loud *boom* and saw a spurt of flame rise from where she’d left Theo and Nim at the lab truck. A second later, another explosion sounded. Pinon’s cage.

Diana gave Jason one swift kick in the ass, as was tradition, then yanked the door from an armored truck and wrapped it tightly around him. That would hold him for a short while at least.

She glanced over her shoulder. The sun was about to set. They had only a few minutes left, and the spring was almost a quarter mile away.

She raced to the Humvee and threw open the passenger door.

“What did you do to him?” Alia asked when she heard her brother crying inside his metal cocoon.

Diana snapped the plastic bands binding her wrists.

“Nothing,” she said. “He did it to himself.” She turned her back to Alia. “Now get on.”

This time there was no argument. Alia leapt onto her back, and they were running toward the spring.

Alia held tight to Diana's neck, taking in the chaos she'd unleashed, trying to forget the sounds of Jason's whimpers as they sprinted toward the spring. Had Theo and Nim survived, too? How much time did they have left?

Branches struck her cheeks as they clambered down the slope to the river, racing along its sandy banks.

"What if we're too late?" Alia panted, unsure why *she* was out of breath.

"We won't be."

"But what if we are?"

"I don't know," Diana said, unslinging her as they neared the plane tree. "I guess we just keep fighting. Together."

They splashed into the shallows of the riverbed, the water growing deeper as they plunged toward the spring. Around her, Alia heard the chorus building once more, girls' voices multiplying as she sank waist deep in the water, stumbling over slick stones, soaked sneakers searching for purchase on the river's sandy bottom. She saw Eris high above them, heard her horrid screeching, saw the twins in their chariots racing along the riverbanks, both of them laughing, shrill and victorious.

Too late. Too late.

As the sun sank below the horizon, Alia hurled herself into the shining waters of the spring. She plunged beneath the surface, and the world went dark and silent. The water was far deeper than she'd expected, the cold like a hand sliding closed around her. Her feet kicked, but she could feel nothing beneath her. She was no longer sure which way she was facing or where the surface might be. There was only darkness all around.

She could feel that winged thing inside her, thrashing, but she couldn't tell if it was fighting to keep hold or to break free.

Don't go. The thought came unbidden to her mind. She didn't mean it. She'd fought too hard to release the world from the horror this curse would bring. But some part of her wished she could keep a scrap of this power for herself. She'd done good with it, saved Diana with it. For a brief moment, that righteous anger had burned bright in her heart, and it had belonged to no one but her.

Her lungs tightened, hungry for air. Had the spring done its work? She didn't know, but she didn't want to drown finding out. She expelled her remaining breath, watched the bubbles rise, and knew which way to go. She shot upward and broke free of the river's grasp, hauling herself back to shallower water, sucking in great gulps of air.

"Well?" shouted Nim from the shore, Theo beside her in the blue light of dusk. A bolt of joy—they'd made it. But…

"What happened?" asked Diana, offering Alia her hand and helping her rise.

"Nothing."

Alia looked up at the sliver of moon that had appeared in the twilight sky, helplessness weighting her heart.

A rumble filled the air. Alia looked to the road, wondering what fresh disaster was headed their way, but the sound didn't seem to be coming from there.

"What is that noise?" said Theo.

It was coming from everywhere. She began to pick out different pieces in the roar: the punishing din of artillery fire, the thunder of tanks, the shriek of fighter jets. And screams. The screams of the dying.

"Oh God," she said. "It's starting."

Diana blinked, her eyes deep blue in the fading light. Her shoulders sagged, and it was as if an invisible crown had slid from her head. "We failed. We were too late."

Was it my fault? Alia wondered. Had she doomed them in that last moment? In her selfish desire to keep some of that mysterious power for her own?

They stood hip deep in the river as the sound grew, shaking the earth and the branches of the plane trees. It rose like a wave, towering over them, the coming of a future thick with human misery.

And then, like a wave, it broke.

The sound receded in a rush, the tide retreating—and then gone.

Diana's breath caught. "Alia," she said. "Look."

Three figures stood by the plane tree, their bodies glowing golden in the gathering dark. Their features were indistinct, but Alia could see that one of them was a girl.

Helen. The girl stepped forward, her feet light on the ground, older than when she'd been allowed to race near the banks of the Eurotas. She placed a glowing wreath of lotus flowers against the plane tree, touched her fingers once, lightly, to its gray trunk.

In the golden sheen cast upon the waters of the spring, Alia saw armies retreating, soldiers laying down their weapons, crowds of angry people breaking their stride. The light faded, and Alia watched as Helen and her brothers drifted away from the river, until she could no longer find their shapes in the shadows. Wherever they were going, she hoped they found peace.

She met Diana's gaze, almost afraid to speak. "Is it over?"

Diana took a shaky breath. "I think so," she said tentatively, as if she couldn't quite believe it. "We changed the future. We stopped a war."

From the road, Alia heard the cry of sirens and saw the flashing lights of police cars and fire trucks approaching.

She and Diana made their way to the riverbank, and Nim seized Alia in a tight hug.

"I thought you were dead," Alia said, the ache of tears pressing at her throat.

Nim's laugh was part sob. "I kind of was."

“Hey, so was I,” said Theo. “I did some really good dying.”

“He also put a wrecking ball through Jason’s firewall,” said Nim.

“Yeah,” Theo said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his ridiculous trousers. “I can’t guarantee that there won’t be some fallout at Keralis Labs, though.”

Alia winced. “I’m betting after all of this, the board isn’t going to want me or Jason anywhere near the company.”

Theo’s shoulders lifted. “Sorry?”

“I’m not,” Alia said. “I’ll be fine. I’ll build something of my own.”

Angry voices drifted down from the road, shouting in Greek.

“Should we go up there?” said Diana.

“No,” said Alia. “I don’t think we should. Let Jason explain why he has a heavily armed militia in the middle of a country road.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” said Nim.

They sat down beneath the drooping branches of a willow. In the dark, no one looking down from above would see them, though if anyone came investigating, they’d be easy enough to spot. But why would they? The battle had been waged on the road. There were no signs that it had spread to the river’s banks, that beneath the branches of a plane tree an age of bloodshed had been prevented.

“I don’t know,” said Alia. “I hope there’s some way to reach him, to help him. I still can’t quite believe that my brother did this.”

“And my best friend,” said Theo.

“No offense,” Nim said, “but that douchebag tried to kill me—I hope he rots.”

Theo nodded. “Fair point.”

Diana clutched Alia’s arm. “Alia, they’re agreeing.”

“Hey,” said Nim, “that’s true. And I haven’t wanted to stab you for a solid fifteen minutes, Theo.”

“How about now?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“How about now?”

“Theo—”

“How about now?”

Nim grimaced.

“Don’t worry,” said Alia. “Even I want to stab him.”

The shining scythe of the reaping moon hung low over the valley, visible once more, and they sat together, side by side, watching the stars appear and the lights of the city multiply in the distance. After a while, they heard more cars arrive, and then others depart.

“I guess someone is making decisions,” said Alia.

“How do you feel?” Diana asked.

“Tired,” Alia said. “Sad. Sore.”

“But do you feel different?”

“No,” she said cautiously. “I feel bruised all over and more than a little freaked out about what the hell I’m going to do with the brother you turned into a gibbering bowl of jelly, but I just feel like me.”

“Just you is pretty good,” said Theo, and Alia felt her cheeks go warm.

“Just me is pretty hungry,” she said lightly.

Nim flopped backward. “We don’t have any money.”

“We’ll live off the land!” said Theo.

Diana couldn't breathe; the water had her, the current driving her forward with impossible speed. She kept her arms straight before her, her body taut as she arrowed through the dark, the rush of the water like thunder in her ears. Some part of her ached for the friends she'd left behind, trembled with fear at what might lie ahead, but she refused to be distracted. There could be no mistakes this time.

She shoved all of her will into the heartstone, her only thought: *Home*. The bright shores of Themyscira, the little cove that cut into the northern coast, the cliffs that rose above it, the landscape of her heart.

Behind her closed lids, she sensed light, but she could not open her eyes against the force of the water, and then, with a tremendous burst of speed, she was hurled ashore. She slammed against the sand with enough force to rattle her bones and send her head spinning. No—not sand, stone. She was lying in the blue-lit hollow of the Oracle's temple, sprawled wet and bedraggled in the moat that ran along the bramble walls.

The Oracle sat beside the bronze tripod, a slender curl of smoke rising from the brazier into the night sky.

Slowly, Diana pushed the heavy tangle of her hair back from her face and rose. She didn't know what to say. It had been hard enough facing the Oracle before, but now she knew she was in the presence of the very goddesses who had founded Themyscira, who had given her a second chance to save herself, to save Alia. What did you say to a goddess when you had no tribute to offer? Maybe a simple "thank you."

But in the next moment, she heard voices. They were coming from the tunnel she'd braved to visit the Oracle only days ago.

"This was inevitable." Tek's voice. "We've been living on borrowed time since—"

"Do not say my daughter's name again," said Hippolyta, and Diana's heart squeezed at the sound of her mother's voice. "Not in this place."

"Let us hope the Oracle accepts our sacrifices," said another voice, familiar but less well known.

Diana froze, unsure of what to do. Hide? Face them here in the Oracle's sanctuary? The Oracle extended her arm, one long finger pointing, and Diana heard a whispering behind her. The brambles parted. She hesitated for a moment, then hooked her hands into the twisting gray vines and climbed into the wall.

The brambles closed around her, but Diana felt only the briefest panic. There was something gentle in the movement of the branches now, in the way they shifted so she could turn and peer through the spaces between them into the Oracle's chamber.

Diana could see her mother and Tek emerging from the tunnel with Biette, Sela, Arawelo, Marguerite, and Hongyu—all members of the Amazon Council. It was Hongyu's voice she'd heard.

The Amazons waited in respectful silence on the other side of the moat.

The Oracle rose. Her hood slipped back, revealing the face of an ancient crone. “Sisters of the Bow and Spear, have you come to make your offering?”

“We have,” said Hippolyta. “We bring you gifts and pray you find them wor—”

“I will accept no offering this day.”

The members of the Council exchanged stricken looks.

Hippolyta shut her eyes briefly. “Then we’ve come too late. The island’s sickness, the earthquakes—”

With a start, Diana realized her mother wore the same purple silks and amethysts she’d been wearing when Diana had left. The Council had been meeting to decide whether to consult the Oracle, and this must be the delegation they’d sent. That meant only hours had passed on Themyscira. If that was the case—Diana tried to temper her hope and failed. She’d been sure she would return to exile and punishment, but what if they didn’t know she’d gone? She could slip back into the city and be at Maeve’s bedside in under an hour.

“Why did you wait so long to visit my temple?” asked the Oracle.

A crease appeared between Hippolyta’s brows. “The Council meeting was unusually contentious. At one point, I feared we’d come to blows.”

Could that have been Alia’s power? Diana wondered.

“Is there no way to save Themyscira?” asked Tek impulsively. “Can we not—”

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled through the temple. “I have accepted no offering, and yet you dare to speak these questions?”

Tek bowed her head, her hands clenching into fists. She wasn’t particularly good at meek. “I beg your forgiveness. I seek only to protect our people.”

The thunder faded, and the Oracle’s voice calmed. “You need not fear for your people, Tekmessa.” Tek’s face snapped up. “Nor for the island. This time of trouble has passed.”

Though they held their tongues, the Council exchanged worried looks, and Diana sensed their confusion.

The Oracle made a disgruntled humming noise. “And still you wait for explanations.” She waved a gnarled hand. “The island was thrown into imbalance by a disturbance in the World of Man, but the unrest is at an end.”

A slow smile spread over Hongyu’s face, and a sigh of relief seemed to pass through the Council members. Hippolyta blew out a surprisingly unqueenlike breath, and Tek grinned, slinging an arm around her shoulders. Hippolyta reached for Tek’s hand and let their fingers entwine.

“I was so sure it was something worse,” she murmured. “Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

“Just be glad it’s over,” said Tek. “Can you do that?” Hippolyta returned her smile.

But the Oracle spoke again. “Do not think to rest, Daughters of Themyscira. I have looked into the waters and seen a battle waged in the World of Man. One of your own will wade into the mortal fray to face this turmoil, a trial that will test her and decide the fate of this island and us all.”

Tek squared her shoulders. Hongyu lifted her chin. Even in her mother’s eyes, Diana saw the light of battle burning. Diana wondered which of the Council’s great warriors would face the challenge the Oracle described.

“Go now,” said the Oracle. “Rebuild your walls, set your cities to rights, and trouble me no more.”

The Amazons made their bows and departed silently through the tunnel of brambles. Diana was afraid to watch her mother go. She wanted to run after them, offer some foolish explanation, hold her mother close. She even wanted to hug Tek. Instead, she forced herself to wait.

When their footsteps had faded, the Oracle turned to Diana and the vines parted, allowing her to pass from the wall.

“So you see, Daughter of Earth, I have kept your secret.”

Diana longed to ask why, but she knew any question to the Oracle would come at a price.

“You are one of them now,” said the Oracle. “Battle-tested. Even if they do not know it, you do.”

Battle-born at last. They would never know what she’d done, the quest she’d completed. There would be no songs sung about it, no stories of glory shared. It didn’t matter. She knew who she was and the ordeal she’d faced. She was an Amazon. The knowledge burned like a secret flame inside her, a light no one could extinguish, no matter what names they called her. Diana knew that she deserved her place here—and she knew there was more than just this life on this island.

“Thank you,” Diana whispered.

“You took the chance as we hoped you would,” said the Oracle. “We did nothing.”

But that wasn’t quite true. “When I came to ask about Alia, you told me I wasn’t a true Amazon.”

“Did we?”

Well, not exactly, but the meaning had been clear. “You told me I would fail.”

“We couldn’t know you would succeed.”

Realization struck Diana with the force of an unexpected wave. “You wanted me to go. That’s why you said those things.”

“Better to choose a quest feeling you have something to prove than take it on as a burden. We needed a champion, and you needed a chance to learn what you are capable of.”

“But I almost failed!” Diana said, her mind reeling. “The world was almost plunged into an age of warfare! What if I’d lost?”

“But you didn’t.”

"What if I'd chosen to come back to Themyscira when you offered me the chance, instead of facing Jason?"

"Then we would have known you aren't the hero we hoped for."

"But—"

The air rumbled with distant thunder. Diana ground her teeth in frustration. Maybe the Oracle was right. Maybe she'd needed to choose the path for herself. Maybe she'd fought harder because she'd known she had no one else to believe in her. Then she remembered Nim at the gala, saying, *Oh man, do you have one of those tough-love families? I just don't buy into that.*

"Nim had it right," she muttered.

"Oh, very well," said the Oracle. "Draw closer, Daughter, and never say we are not generous in our gifts."

The waters of the moat shimmered, and in them, Diana saw a great swath of green set like an emerald into the gray spires of a city. *The park,* Diana realized. The one she'd seen from the windows of Alia's bedroom. The image shifted, and she saw a stone terrace marked by arches, a circular fountain with a winged woman at its center. Two figures sat at the edge, their faces turned to the sun.

"Alia," she whispered. Alia was holding Theo's hand. They looked older somehow, and Diana wondered what time she was peering into, how long it had been since the fight at the spring, if all those memories had faded for them.

Another figure appeared—Nim zooming by on roller skates, a pink bandage on one of her dimpled knees. She turned in circles before them, her flowered skirt flaring. She was saying something, but Diana couldn't make out the words.

Another girl whizzed by on skates. She was tall and blond with a pretty—if somewhat weaselly—face. She snagged Nim's hand, and they spun away, laughing.

Theo and Alia rose, ready for whatever adventure Nim had suggested, and as Theo lifted Alia's hand to plant a kiss on her knuckles, Diana saw something on her wrist—a red tattoo in the shape of a star. The heartstone. *Promise me you'll come back someday.*

Diana reached toward the water, and the image faded.

Was it a promise she could keep? It seemed impossible, but she'd thought so much was impossible, and again and again she'd proven herself wrong.

"I miss them," she said. Her voice sounded small beneath the stars of the Oracle's sky. "They're worth fighting for."

"Princess," said the Oracle. For a moment, she took a new shape, one Diana had never seen before—a soldier standing with sword and shield in hand. She wore an armored breastplate, a lasso at her hip. Her blue eyes flashed, her black hair lifted by a distant wind. There was something familiar in her features. "You will have the chance to fight for them again."

The soldier vanished, replaced once more by the crone. "Go home, Diana," said the Oracle. "Maeve will be waiting for you." Grateful tears pricked

Diana's eyes—her friend was well. The Oracle nodded at Diana's bracelets. "Just make sure to stop at the Armory first."

Diana smiled. She thanked the Oracle and hurried through the tunnel, her steps hastening, her heart full of joy. She did not know what the future held, only that the world—full of danger, and challenge, and wonder—was waiting to be discovered.

She ran to meet it.

LEIGH BARDUGO is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Six of Crows, Crooked Kingdom,* and the Shadow and Bone Trilogy. She was born in Jerusalem, grew up in Los Angeles, and graduated from Yale University. She fell under Wonder Woman's spell early and spent a good chunk of her childhood making construction-paper bracelets and spinning herself dizzy in her driveway. These days, she lives and writes in Hollywood, where she can occasionally be heard singing with her band.

leighbardugo.com

@LBardugo

As Bruce rounded another bend, the police sirens suddenly turned deafening, and a mass of red and blue lights flashed against the buildings near the end of the street. Cement barricades and yellow police tape completely blocked the intersection. Fire engines and black SWAT trucks clustered together, with the silhouettes of officers running back and forth in front of the headlights.

Inside his car, the electronic voice came on again, followed by a transparent map overlaid against his windshield. *"Heavy police activity ahead. Alternate route suggested."*

A sense of dread filled his chest.

Bruce flicked away the map and pulled to an abrupt halt in front of the barricade—right as the unmistakable *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire rang out in the night air.

He remembered the sound all too well. The memory of his parents' deaths sent a wave of dizziness through him. *Another robbery. A murder. That's what all this is.*

Then he shook his head. *No, that can't be right*. There were far too many cops here for a simple robbery.

"Step *out* of your vehicle, and put your hands in the air!" a police officer shouted through a megaphone, her voice echoing along the block. Bruce's head jerked toward her. For an instant, he thought her command was directed at him, but then he saw that her back was turned, her attention fixed on the corner of a building. "We have you surrounded, Nightwalker! This is your final warning!"

Another officer came running over to Bruce's car. He whirled an arm exaggeratedly for Bruce to turn his car around. His voice harsh with panic, he warned, "Turn back *now*. It's not safe!"

Before Bruce could reply, a blinding fireball exploded behind the officer. The street rocked.

Even from inside his car, Bruce felt the heat of the blast. Every window in the building burst simultaneously, a million shards of glass raining down on the pavement below. The police ducked in unison, their arms shielding their heads. Fragments of glass flew toward Bruce's car, dinging like hail against his windshield.

From inside the blockade, a white car veered around the corner at top speed. Bruce saw immediately what the car was aiming for—a slim gap between the police barricades, where a SWAT team truck had just pulled through.

"I said, *get out of here*!" the officer shouted at Bruce. A thin ribbon of blood trickled down the man's face. "That's an *order*!"

Bruce heard the scream of the getaway car's tires against the asphalt as it raced toward the gap. He'd been in his father's garage a thousand times, helping him tinker with an endless number of engines from the best cars in the world. At WayneTech, Bruce had watched in fascination as tests were

conducted on custom engines, conceptual jets, stealth tech, new vehicles of every kind.

And so he knew: whatever was installed under that hood was faster than anything the GCPD could hope to have.

They'll never catch him.

But I can.

His Aston Martin was probably the only vehicle here that could overtake the criminal's, the only one powerful enough to chase it down. Bruce's eyes followed the path the car would likely take, his gaze settling on a sign at the end of the street that pointed toward the freeway.

I can get him.

The white getaway vehicle shot straight through the gap in the barricade, clipping two police cars as it went.

No, not this time. Bruce slammed his gas pedal.

The Aston Martin's engine let out a deafening roar and sped forward. The officer who'd shouted at him stumbled back. In the rearview mirror, Bruce saw him scramble to his feet and wave the other officers' cars forward, both his arms held up high.

"Hold your fire!" Bruce could hear him yelling. "Civilian in proximity —*hold your fire!*"

Bruce narrowed his eyes and tightened his hands on the steering wheel. Few things in his life seemed within his control right now—but this? This moment was his.

The getaway car made a sharp turn at the first intersection, and Bruce sped behind it a few seconds later. The street zigzagged, then turned in a wide arc as it led toward the freeway—and the Nightwalker took the on-ramp, leaving a trail of exhaust and two black skid marks on the road.

Bruce raced forward in close pursuit; his car mapped the ground instantly, swerving in a perfect curve to follow the ramp onto the freeway. He tapped twice on the windshield right over where the Nightwalker's white vehicle was.

"Follow him," Bruce commanded.

Penguin Random House

What's next on your reading list?

Discover your next great read!

Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this author.

Sign up now.